

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE SECRET OF THE PARCHMENT BOOK





in

**THE SECRET
OF THE
PARCHMENT BOOK**

An old handmade parchment book is stolen from the house of Professor Mathewson. His daughter, Barbara, engages The Three Investigators to recover it. However, the professor tells them that the book is not really worth much, as it is not a genuine antique from the European Middle Ages. Jupiter, Pete and Bob suspect that the theft is not for the item itself but for the content—as they believe that the book carries a secret. However, to unravel this secret, they have to first find the book.

The Three Investigators
in
The Secret of the Parchment Book

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1. The Parchment Maker

A red-blue blazing flame shot towards Jupiter Jones.

He stopped so abruptly that Bob Andrews, who was walking close behind him, bumped into him. Jupiter choked and coughed in a sudden, but he could not take his eyes off the flickering fire in front of a stranger's face.

"Geez, Jupe," complained Bob, "watch out!"

"I'm supposed to watch out? That applies more to him!" The First Investigator pointed to the fire-eater in a one-piece yellow suit. Some children in the crowd all around pointed at the performer with their mouths open before their parents pushed them on.

This weekend, a craft fair was held in the market square of Rocky Beach. It seemed to have attracted every single resident of the coastal town, thanks to the beautiful weather. The sun was hot and there was hardly a breeze that early afternoon. People gathered together, jostling for space in front of the stalls, many of which could only be glimpsed through the crowd.

The fire-eater lowered a blazing torch, blew up a last flame and wiped his mouth. "Sorry, buddy!" His voice sounded harsh. He cleared his throat and it wouldn't have surprised Jupiter if a puff of smoke had curled up from his broad nose. "I was watching that little girl over there and that's why I didn't see you... You understand, right?" With a conspiratorial wink, he pointed over his shoulder at a blonde woman. An elaborate braid fell over her back and from there it wound its way to her waist.

The next moment, the fire-eater disappeared into the crowd without a word.

"Interesting." Jupiter went in the direction the fire-eater had pointed. "Most remarkable indeed. Come along!"

Bob, along with his other friend, Pete Crenshaw, followed him. "I see it, but I can hardly believe it," Bob said. "I mean, the hairstyle may be cool, but the fact that you're—" He broke off in the middle of the sentence as Jupiter walked past the blonde.

Jupiter pushed his way past some children who were keenly watching a blacksmith striking a red-hot piece of iron with a heavy hammer. Against a wooden table leaned three swords with flashing blades.

Finally, the First Investigator stopped right next to an inconspicuous girl about his age. She was wearing a brown baseball cap and carrying a backpack.

"What does he want with the girl there?" whispered Pete—not quietly enough, because Jupiter could hear him, and the girl probably could as well.

However, Jupiter was not concerned with the girl, but with the stall she was at. In front of a fire-red Plymouth—a 1958 Fury, if he was not mistaken—stood a high, crooked folding table. It looked as if it could collapse with the first gust of wind.

On the edge of the open boot sat a fat man with bulky glasses. A worn grey shirt and a leather waistcoat stretched over his strong upper body, and his black moustache had strands of silvery white in places.

On the table lay some brochures and stacks of thick sheets of paper. Noticeably the girl and The Three Investigators were the only visitors at this stall.

Jupiter picked up one of the brown sheets from the table and held it above his head against the sun. The sunlight filtered through and made the paper shine golden yellow. No, it was not a simple piece of paper—it was firmer and...

"It's parchment..." the fat man explained, "made by these very hands!" He demonstratively raised his arms. His fingers were astonishingly sinewy, and his nails were cut short and yellowish in colour, like those of a heavy smoker's teeth.

"I assume with some certainty," replied Jupiter, "that it was not your hands alone that did it, but your head that helped you?"

The man paused and then laughed loudly. "Very good! I like you! Tell you what—you get ten percent off everything you buy from me today." He reached for one of the brochures and held it out to Jupiter. The parchment products were listed in it, along with the prices.

The girl raised her head. "Hey, Arthur... I suppose you offer that to everybody, don't you?" She sounded as if she had a cold, and then she sneezed.

Pete took a step back—he didn't need a cold. The weekend had just begun, and he didn't want to spend it in bed with a cold.

The man stood up. The car squeaked in the suspension and jerked up a bit. "Well, maybe not to everyone... but I like this boy, and I feel sorry for you, Barbara... or rather, for your father. I think it's great that you want to help him. It's difficult to just walk away from a break-in, so I support you. While I do this as a business, I remain empathetic to individual circumstances."

The First Investigator put the parchment sheet back on the table. He wanted to pinch his lower lip with his thumb and forefinger, as he always did when he was thinking particularly hard, but after touching the parchment, his fingers smelled slightly musty of an old leather coat.

He lowered his hand. "Not that I wish to interfere, but—"

"—But you're going to anyway, right?" Barbara pulled her baseball cap further onto her forehead. Brown curls framed her somewhat chubby face. Her eyes shimmered grey-green.

Jupiter refrained from grinning. She was really quick-witted.

"It is a kind of professional curiosity," explained Jupiter. "If someone mentions a break-in, I automatically prick up my ears. It may be none of my business, but—"

"You're right about that!" Barbara snapped.

"Leave it, Juve," Pete suggested. "If someone doesn't want our help, we won't impose on them."

Jupiter, on the other hand, was unimpressed. "... We are investigators," he finished his sentence. "If you need assistance..." He pulled out a business card of The Three Investigators, and held it up to the girl.

Barbara took a quick look at it, but didn't reach for it. "Ten percent, yes?" she asked the stall owner and turned her attention to the brochure again.

Jupiter put the card back in his trouser pocket. Pete lowered his eyes as the little scene obviously embarrassed him.

Bob stepped uncomfortably from one leg to the other. He turned to the fat man. "Look, Mister..."

"Arthur," said the man. "Just call me Arthur. My craft is many centuries old, and back then, people didn't address each other so formally... or did they refer to the legendary king of the Round Table as Mr Arthur?"

"Unlikely," Bob admitted.

"Well, the king was surely treated with reverence," Jupiter stated, "but I know what you really mean."

“So Arthur, what exactly is your trade?” Pete asked.

“I am a parchment maker. I work according to the old traditions of my ancestors, who followed this profession for many generations.”

“—And you can earn a living from that?” Bob asked.

Arthur laughed. “Not from that alone, admittedly... but it’s a nice hobby. Besides, I deal in classic cars—like this one...” He pointed over his shoulder backwards at the Plymouth.

“—But my real passion is making parchments and also making fine paper. This art was particularly prevalent in Europe. Since paper became more and more popular, probably from China, parchment was used less and less because it was much more expensive than paper that could simply be made from old rags.

“A parchment book... is mostly used for Bibles, you see... Such a Bible was usually the most valuable possession of a monastery—more valuable than the building itself.” They could tell that Arthur had a passion for his work. “—But I don’t want to bore you. Of course, nowadays there are very few parchment makers left. It’s a craft for lovers, so to speak. I am possibly the only one in this region—possibly in the whole of Southern California. Before me, it was my father, going back to my great-grandfather. My family has lived around here for generations, but we have never really been known for our hobby, let alone that we made a lot of money with it.”

“So, Arthur,” Bob began. “I often write things down. I’d like to do it on real parchment for once. Don’t you have a notebook or something?”

The man interlocked his fingers and bent them so that the joints cracked. “Not a notebook! This is not a stack of white-bleached paper stapled together, but rather a distinguished book block that is bound in the traditional way. That’s what I do.”

“Sounds expensive,” mumbled Bob.

“It is!” Barbara remarked and put aside the brochure she had just leafed through. “I’ll buy that book block you just mentioned, Arthur.” She pulled on a cord that lay around her neck like a chain, and a brown pouch appeared—the kind that had been in fashion a few decades ago.

“You will not regret it!” The parchment maker dropped back into his place at the edge of the boot—which made the whole Plymouth Fury groan. He then rummaged through several boxes that filled the rest of the boot and the back seat above the folded-down backrest.

“I’ve been thinking.” Barbara looked at Jupiter defiantly and reached out her hand. “Can I have your card, please?”

Jupiter pulled the card out of his pocket again and gave it to Barbara. The card said:



“So, you’re Jupiter Jones,” Barbara said and looked at Jupiter for a short moment. “Pete Crenshaw.” She let her gaze wander unerringly and smiled—more than that, she even winked at Pete, who had no idea what was going on. “Bob Andrews,” Barbara finally said.

“That’s me,” Bob said.

“I know.”

“How? I don’t remember us introducing ourselves to you.”

“Pete called him ‘Jupe’...” She pointed to Jupiter. “—And you mentioned that you often take notes. ‘Records and Research’ suited you best.”

“I am impressed,” said the First Investigator. “Are you going to tell us about the break-in now? Has a parchment book been stolen from you or rather your father?”

Barbara turned the business card in the fingers of her right hand while she wrapped the tips of her curls around her index finger with her left. “How did you figure that out?” She was visibly impressed.

Before Jupiter could answer, Arthur found what he was looking for and came back with an antique-looking book with a very traditional and classy binding. The pages were thick and slightly wavy. “As promised, my dear, ten percent cheaper!”

She paid. The parchment maker wrapped the book in several layers of newspaper and put the bundle in a plastic bag. Barbara took it and beamed all over her face. “My father will be thrilled.” She turned to Jupiter. “So, as I was asking, how did you figure that out?”

“You obviously told Arthur about the break-in before we got here. He also offered you a discount so that you could help your father, probably get him a replacement... and there you go!”

“Come along,” Barbara asked and sneezed again.

“Where to?”

“I want to ask my father if he can afford three investigators.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s no problem,” Pete said.

“Why?” asked Barbara.

“We don’t take a fee.”

She laughed, and her grey-green eyes sparkled mischievously. “—And I thought you were going to offer me a ten percent discount!”

2. Professor Mathewson

Barbara told The Three Investigators that she lived with her father in the villa district of Rocky Beach, not far from the foothills of the cliffs.

They opted to walk the short distance, but after only five minutes, Jupiter looked at his watch and noticed that lunch time was approaching. He realized how hungry he was and began to sweat, so he decided to distract himself from his hunger. "What was that exactly, Barbara? With the break-in, I mean."

She did not answer him immediately, but marched on briskly. A bottle of red juice swung back and forth in a net on the side of her backpack.

"Let me explain something else to you first," she finally said. "The parchment book that was stolen from my father looked very similar to the one I just bought from Arthur. Well, that makes sense."

"Why?" asked Pete.

"—Because the stolen book also came from Arthur's parchment workshop, or rather, from his great-grandfather's." Barbara grinned. "Parchment makers don't exist like a dime a dozen, as Arthur told us."

Bob stopped. "Of course! I can't believe I didn't recall it right away."

"What?" asked Barbara.

"I read about the theft in *Rocky Beach Today*," Bob said. "Wasn't that just yesterday? The writer made fun of the fact that a parchment book that was anything but old had been stolen. He wondered whether the thieves had misjudged the situation because the item was worthless—at least, that was what he claimed."

"—And you read such reports?" Barbara pulled the bottle out of the net on the side of the backpack and drank from it.

"Sure," Bob said. "I'm in charge of research, and that also means always keeping my eyes open. If I hear of any crime in Rocky Beach, I'll naturally take notice."

"Fine," Barbara said and went on. The Three Investigators followed her.

"Tell us more," Jupiter asked. "When was the break-in? Was anything else stolen?"

"Nothing else! That's what's so strange. You see, the parchment book was really not worth much. The thieves could have got hold of much more precious things, but they only took the book. By the way, it was three days ago—to answer your first question." She pointed. "We'll be there soon, and then my father can tell you everything himself. You know, with all the talk about the book being of little value, I'm now telling you that it meant a lot to him. He loved it, and the theft hit him hard."

"Maybe it wasn't about the book," Jupiter said thoughtfully, "but about something in it."

Barbara shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe... All I know is that my father is crazy about that thing. Well, he should be... well, you'll see."

"He's a researcher, isn't he?" Bob asked. "I seem to remember that was mentioned in the newspaper report."

"Professor of history, specializing in the European Middle Ages," Barbara said. "Sounds pretty clever... but also boring."

“European Middle Ages,” mused Jupiter. “This, of course explains why he is interested in parchment books. They were particularly common in Europe.”

Barbara nodded. “—But as I said, the book that was stolen from him was not centuries old, otherwise he would hardly have put it in an unlocked cupboard. In any case, he always said it felt like it was actually from the 16th century.”

“Wouldn’t it have fallen apart ages ago?” Pete asked.

“Make no mistake, Pete,” Jupiter countered. “The old parchments are astonishingly durable—much more so than our present paper.”

Pete waved away. “It’s okay. I’m probably the only one who doesn’t know anything about this.”

Barbara grinned again. “Never mind... I, for one, have heard more about it than I’d like.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ve had to sit through too many lectures—at dinner, sometimes at breakfast... but then I turned a deaf ear and forgot most of it right away. Anyway, here we are. That’s our house over there.”

She pointed to a huge plot of land surrounded by a waist-high wall of old stones. Behind a lawn as large as a football field, an old, stately mansion stood majestically, nestled among trees with wide-spreading crowns. A myriad of bright red cherries glistened on one of them.

Just the sight of it made Jupiter’s mouth water. The way the mansion looked, he was even more surprised that nothing else had been stolen when the thief broke into it. Was it that everything else had been secured too well?

Barbara pushed a garden door in the wall. “Come along! I’m sure my father will tell you all about the theft.”

Professor Mathewson turned out to be a friendly man in his mid-forties. His daughter briefly explained why The Three Investigators were there.

The professor led them into the living room to a round wooden table where everyone sat down. He offered them something to drink. The ice-cold juice tasted wonderful, and the pleasant coolness amid countless bookshelves in the living room did the rest to make the three boys feel comfortable.

“So you’re investigators?” Barbara’s father asked, amused.

Before Jupiter could reply, Barbara drummed her fingers on the table. “They are, as I told you just now, and they will solve the mystery of the parchment book.”

“Mystery?” Mathewson now poured himself a glass as well. “What mystery?”

“Did you not wonder, sir, why only the book was stolen?” Jupiter asked. “Barbara mentioned to us that it wasn’t really worth much.”

“You may be right, young man, but...” He broke off. “Let’s put it this way—I’d like the book back. It was a wonderful piece, crafted with great skill and intelligence.”

“Exactly how old was it, sir?” Bob asked.

The professor replied without hesitation. “A hundred and twenty years—so it doesn’t date from the Middle Ages, even if it looked like it and even smelled like it. Perhaps that is why the thieves thought it was particularly valuable.”

Jupiter thought of the smell on his fingers and nodded with a mixture of understanding and unease. “I can roughly imagine what you mean.”

The professor slowly walked over to a closed cupboard next to a bookshelf and opened it. “The book was stolen from here just three days ago. A lot of things were rummaged through, drawers ripped open and all that sort of thing... but the police think it was only because the thieves were looking for the parchment book.” He took a pipe and a jar from a wooden box.

“In any case, the police don’t think the theft is very important. They didn’t say it, but I could see it in their faces. They didn’t think it was worth dwelling on.”

“We don’t see it that way,” Jupiter countered. “Where and when did you acquire the book, Professor?”

“Do you think it matters?”

“We must consider everything.”

“Not that I’m ready to entrust you guys with the case yet, but—”

“—But I really want to!” Barbara cut in eagerly.

Pete showed an embarrassed grin.

The professor closed the cupboard and sat down at the table. He took tobacco from the jar and filled his pipe. “I bought it long ago at a flea market. Before you ask—as you would want to consider everything—let me think... it was about ten years ago.”

“I guess it was lucky to find such a nice item at a flea market,” Bob said.

Professor Mathewson nodded. “The seller at the time didn’t know what was in one of his boxes. I bought it from him cheap.”

“Did you first think it was an authentic medieval item?”

“No—you can tell at first glance if you know your way around such things. However, it was artfully crafted and certainly worth ten times what I paid for it.” He checked the fit of the tobacco in the pipe and looked satisfied. From a drawer at the table he pulled a pack of matches. “I did some checks later. The book came from a parchment maker who lived right here in Rocky Beach... As far as I know, he crafted exquisite and distinctive parchment items as curiosities or unusual objects. These creations attract enthusiasts, serving more as collectibles or decorative pieces than for their original purposes. In fact, his great-grandson also lives here today and pursues the same hobby. Maybe I should have a replacement made. Then I could forget all this trouble.”

“Replacement?” Barbara was radiant. She pulled up her backpack that stood between her feet under the table, took out the bundle wrapped in newspaper and handed it to her father. “Well, I have a surprise for you, Dad! Take a look at this!”

Mr Mathewson put the box of matches down and unwrapped the bundle. “Barbara! That’s... That’s really sweet of you... but where did you get it?”

“The parchment maker you spoke of,” said Barbara. “Believe it or not, he has a stall at the craft fair. That’s where I met Jupiter, Pete and Bob in the first place.”

Mathewson opened the parchment book. It crunched softly. “One thing at least is clear—I owe my daughter a big favour... and since she’s so keen on you taking up this case, it’s a deal! I will engage your services—uh... what do you call yourselves? ‘The Three Detectives’?”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “The Three Investigators, sir.”

“Sorry.”

The First Investigator stood up extremely satisfied. “Thank you, sir. Perhaps you can answer another question for us. It is possible that the theft wasn’t about the book itself, but rather what was written in it. I assume, of course, that the pages had something written on them.”

“Of course, but that was nothing special. They were old poems... from the Middle Ages. You can now find them on the Internet.”

Jupiter was disappointed. The possibility that the thief had actually been interested in the content of the book seemed to be ruled out, although it could still be that someone had worked a secret message into it. “You wouldn’t happen to have any photographs of the texts?”

“Sadly, no.”

“One last question before I ask you to allow us to look at the place where the parchment book was kept.”

The professor nodded in confusion.

“He often expresses himself so pompously, sir.” Pete punched Jupiter lightly on the shoulder.

“Ask your question then.”

“Who knew you had this parchment book?”

Mathewson thought for a moment. “Nobody, except Barbara and some friends... but none of them could be considered thieves.”

“Are you sure? After all, the book was searched for specifically. What about your colleagues at the university?”

“I don’t think I ever talked about it there.” He faltered. “That means... Now I remember something... but you won’t like it.”

“Don’t keep us in suspense,” demanded Barbara.

“I recently mentioned the book in an interview I gave to an academic history journal. The issue should have been released already, probably just a few days ago, but I haven’t seen it yet.”

Jupiter whistled quietly. “Unfortunately, this considerably widens the circle of suspects! Anyone can read the journal, and it is hardly a coincidence that the theft occurred so shortly after the interview was published. Where were you during the break-in?”

“Although it was after nine in the evening, I was still in the university library over in Los Angeles. I was working on an essay and had to look at some sources. Time often passes so quickly that I don’t even notice how late it is.”

Barbara sighed artificially, which sounded odd given her somewhat congested nose. “It must be another one of those incredibly exciting and thrilling things.” She pulled out a handkerchief and blew her nose.

The professor did not respond to the mocking comment. “I also met a researcher there who asked me for a meeting to discuss one of my projects. We were discussing some apparently contradictory sources when I received Barbara’s call on my mobile phone. She had discovered that there had been a break-in.”

“That was when I came back from a friend’s place,” Barbara added. “Just thinking about it makes me sick.”

“What exactly did you discover?” Jupiter asked. “How did the thief get into the house?”

She closed her eyes as if trying to remember the details. “Outside, I didn’t notice anything, but as my father said, everything was ransacked! Horrible! The police said he came in through the back door.”

“He?” asked Jupiter.

“Well, the thief.”

“Do they know it was a man?”

Barbara shook her head in confusion. “I just thought... but of course, it could have been a woman.”

“In any case, it was upsetting to know that some strange people were walking through my house,” the professor remarked.

Bob scribbled something on his notepad. “Who was this researcher you met with, Professor? It could be that he deliberately kept you out of the house while an accomplice committed the break-in.”

“That seems like a pretty unfounded suspicion to me.”

“No real suspicion,” contradicted Jupiter. “We just have to consider all possibilities. Obviously, nothing more can be said at this stage.”

“His name is Alan Jennings,” said Mathewson. “He is a history researcher in New York. I had never heard of him before... and with respect, I think it’s nonsense that he might be behind it. Why would a person like him go to such lengths to get his hands on a parchment book that is worthless to anyone but me?”

“Perhaps it wasn’t worthless, sir,” Jupiter emphasized.

The professor finally struck a match and lit the pipe, which he had ignored the whole time. Shortly afterwards, a cloud of tobacco smoke floated over the table. Pete suppressed a cough and turned his head away.

“Nevertheless, I don’t think it’s worth pursuing the matter further,” Mathewson said unmoved, “—But I have hired you, and you should know what you are doing.”

“So can we take a closer look around here?” Jupiter asked.

“Go ahead. However, the police have already done so and found nothing.”

3. Checking on Alan Jennings

In Professor Mathewson's house, The Three Investigators had found no further clues. While Bob headed off to do some research in the archives of local newspapers, Jupiter and Pete decided to return to the headquarters of The Three Investigators.

Headquarters was housed in an old mobile home trailer situated within the premises of The Jones Salvage Yard. To hide the trailer from the prying eyes of outsiders, the three boys had it covered under a mountain of scrap metal and other junk.

The trailer could only be accessed via secret passages. The most-often-used entrance was called the Cold Gate. It was a discarded refrigerator, seemingly randomly embedded in the same pile of scrap metal. The fridge door could be opened, but the inside was empty. By triggering a hidden mechanism, the back wall could be pushed aside, revealing a short dark tunnel that led to the door of the trailer.

Over the years, the three boys had developed the trailer into a functioning office, equipped with refurbished items from the salvage yard. That included furniture, a working fridge, and many bookshelves and filing cabinets where they stored folders and files containing reports of their past cases. The trailer also housed equipment for their investigation work, such as computers, video, electronic, and communication gadgets. At the back was a small crime laboratory where they analyzed fingerprints and traces.

Three hours later, Juve and Pete were still sitting around inside the trailer waiting for Bob to return. However, they did not have to wait further when they heard the Cold Gate open. Moments later, Bob entered the trailer and blurted out: "You won't believe what I found out! I searched the *Rocky Beach Today* archives for news about medieval manuscripts, about the parchment maker and... and..."

"—And what?" Pete demanded. "Quit stalling, Bob. We have waited long enough!"

"You recall that Professor Mathewson was meeting a researcher at the time of the break-in?"

Jupiter nodded. "Alan Jennings from New York."

"This Alan Jennings was in the newspaper nearly fifteen years ago."

"Here in Rocky Beach?" Pete asked, astonished.

Bob nodded. "There was a break-in at the time."

"What's the connection?" Jupiter asked.

"Perhaps just a coincidence..." Pete added.

"The real surprise is yet to come. Alan Jennings was considered a suspect, but nothing could ever be proved against him. He made the headlines, and despite official apologies, his reputation as a researcher has suffered some damage... and now guess where exactly this break-in took place."

Pete remained silent while Jupiter seemed thoughtful. "The way you look, Bob, I'd say... at the parchment maker!"

"Bingo!" Bob flicked with thumb and forefinger. "Presumably this Jennings guy tried to get hold of the book back then but did not succeed. Now I believe that he must have read from the journal interview that Professor Mathewson has it... and he's back."

“Well deduced, Bob,” said Jupiter. “Nevertheless, we must not forget that everything could have happened in a completely different way. The evidence may speak against this Mr Jennings, but that does not mean that he is actually guilty.”

“So if this Jennings is the thief, we have to figure out how to find him and bring him to justice,” Pete suggested.

“Take it easy,” Jupiter warned. “Firstly, it is still a matter of conjecture; secondly, we have not yet asked this Jennings; and thirdly, even if he were guilty—which I doubt until we know more—the question would remain as to why he did it.”

Bob grinned. “Maybe he’ll be able to tell us himself soon because... I know where he is right now.”

“You know?” Jupiter asked.

Bob had found out that Alan Jennings was still in Rocky Beach since meeting Barbara’s father.

“I simply called all the hotels around here and asked to speak to Alan Jennings,” Bob said. “I thought, as a researcher, he wouldn’t stay cheap, so I started with the posh places. Fortunately, there aren’t too many of them. In a few places, they said that there was no man of that name, but the Excelsior apologized because Mr Jennings was not in at the moment and would not be back until about six o’clock, as he had already booked a table in the restaurant.

“Would I like to leave a message? I just said that there was no need, because I would rather call again. I was even given the extension number—908, which usually means that Jennings is in that very room—a suite, by the way.”

“Let’s go!” Juve decided.

“Where to?” Pete asked.

“To the Excelsior, where else?”

Together they left Headquarters and got into Pete’s car.

Moments later, Pete flicked the indicator and turned into a side street towards the marina. “A suite at the Excelsior... My goodness, whoever’s staying there should not need to steal a parchment book at all.”

On reaching the hotel, Pete parked his car and the three boys walked towards the noble glass entrance. The hotel was an old building with shiny windows and balconies in all rooms facing the harbour.

A man in a red uniform, with gold decorations on his shoulder, opened the door for them as they approached. The Three Investigators entered and found themselves in the hotel lobby, surrounded by fine leather seats, an antique couch and the gleaming marble front of the reception counter. Next to it was a wide entrance to the hotel restaurant.

It was five o’clock—so it would be another hour before Jennings returned, provided he was on time. The boys entered the restaurant where, at the moment, only two tables were occupied. The First Investigator took a quick glance around, and sat down at a table next to one that had a ‘Reserved’ sign on it. From here, they could also keep an eye on the reception counter.

Bob had copied a photo of Jennings from the newspaper so they could recognize him as soon as he appeared. Uncertain of their next move, they would have to play it by ear.

A waiter—completely dressed in a black suit and with a white cloth over his arm—brought them the menus. “You wish to dine?”

“Certainly!” Jupiter accepted one of the menus with a suave gesture, whereupon the waiter withdrew.

When the boys saw the prices, they were taken aback. They counted up all the money they had on them and came to the conclusion that they could just about afford the simplest dish—a Toast Hawaii.

Pete sighed. “Just eat slowly so we don’t have to reorder.”

It took quite a long time before their food was served on plates that were far too large and—as Jupiter regretted—in portions that were far too small... but at least it tasted very good.

Luckily for them, Jennings showed up a few minutes before six. At the reception counter, he looked at his watch and headed purposefully for the restaurant. He sat down at a table not far from The Three Investigators.

The waiter rushed over immediately. “Can I help you, Mr Jennings?”

“I am still waiting for my companion. As soon as she arrives, bring us a bottle of champagne.”

“Very well.”

Jennings placed a black document bag in front of him on the table. He glanced around the room for a moment, but paid no particular attention to The Three Investigators.

The boys had to wait about five more minutes until a tall and slender Asian woman entered the Excelsior. She was wearing a white shirt and a black skirt, both of which highlighted her fit physique. Frameless glasses sat on her little nose.

The woman went to Jennings’s table and sat down.

“So?” she asked.

“Good news, Shulin.” Jennings tapped on the document bag. “The book has revealed its secret.”

“Bingo!” whispered Jupiter, and the three of them exchanged quick glances.

4. Breaking into the Suite

Shulin leaned back in the leather-covered chair and smiled visibly satisfied. “So all the effort was worth it after all.”

“Did you doubt it?” Alan Jennings opened the menu and slipped it to Shulin. “To celebrate, I propose the *Chateaubriand* for two. I hear it’s excellent.”

“—And exquisitely expensive,” whispered Bob at the table of The Three Investigators.

“Quiet!” Jupiter whispered back and gave Bob a reproachful look. They could not afford to miss a word of what Jennings and Shulin were saying.

“Agreed!” Shulin said. “Are you ready to order? I have to go back to the suite to freshen up a bit. After all, I came straight from the city.” She stood up and straightened her skirt. “Besides... a slightly fancier dress would be more appropriate in this situation.”

Jennings took the document bag and held it out to her. “Take this with you and stow it somewhere.”

“Are you sure? Can we really leave the book in the room?”

The researcher dismissed it with a wave. “It is worthless. We could even give it back if it wasn’t so cumbersome. Everything that matters, I’ve got it now.”

“I hope you’ve written it down and kept it securely.”

He just grinned. “Take the document bag.”

She reached for it. “I’ll be right back. Ten minutes. You go ahead and order. I must admit I’m hungry.”

“Yes, yes.” Jennings watched as she crossed the restaurant area and went to the lifts.

Meanwhile Bob leafed through the menu. He pointed to a certain entry. “Did you see this? *Chateaubriand*. It’s expensive.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “Forget it. That stuff is not for us.” He used his fork to pierce a tiny piece of pineapple and thoughtfully popped it into his mouth. Jupiter’s plate had long since been emptied and Bob had been so excited, he forgot to continue eating.

Jennings waved the waiter over and placed his order. The waiter nodded and walked briskly to the kitchen. Meanwhile, the researcher stood up and headed for the toilet.

“What now?” Jupiter asked when Jennings was out of earshot.

“I wonder what?” Pete drummed on the table top with his fingertips. “Let’s call Inspector Cotta! This is a case for the police.”

The First Investigator shook his head. “Forget it! We have no real evidence.”

“They openly admitted to stealing the book,” Pete said.

“That’s not what I heard,” replied Jupiter. “They spoke of a book that had revealed its secret—nothing more. It is very likely that it is Professor Mathewson’s parchment book... but if Cotta were to turn up here, Jennings could easily wriggle out of it and make the only piece of evidence—the book itself—disappear. The inspector can’t just search the suite like that! And what do we do then?”

“Then we would look stupid,” Pete admitted as he ate the last bit of his Toast Hawaii.

Jupiter shook his head. “It won’t have to come to that, fellas. We need proof, and there is a very simple way for us to get it.”

Bob almost choked. “Are you gonna—”

“There’s more to this whole thing than a stolen book—that’s obvious to all of us. We have to find out what it is all about! The professor hired us to solve the mystery of the parchment book.”

“Well, you could interpret it that way, yes,” said Pete. “Actually, it was Barbara who engaged us to recover the book, and her father went along with it for her sake... In any case, there was never any mention of a mystery.”

“We are committed to the case,” Jupiter remained persistent. “Jennings’s words made it clear that the real value did not lie in the book itself. We have to check it ourselves.”

Now it was Bob who spoke: “So you really want to—”

“Sure.” Jupiter pressed his back against the backrest and crossed his arms. “They have illegally taken the book. As soon as we can be sure that these two criminals are busy with their meal, we will gain access to their suite and get the book back.”

Just then, Jennings came back to his table and let himself fall on his chair.

“Bob, finish your food and once the woman is back, we can proceed as planned,” Jupe urged.

Meanwhile, Jennings kept looking towards the lifts until Shulin came from there. She was wearing a dark grey cocktail dress that ended just above her knees. The frameless glasses had disappeared, probably she had worn contact lenses.

For The Three Investigators, this meant nothing other than that the right time had come. They laboriously scraped together their money, waved to the waiter, and paid for the Toast Hawaii and drinks with a meagre tip on top.

They went to the hotel lobby, from where they could keep an eye on both the lifts and the entrance to the restaurant.

They discussed their plan very briefly. Bob remained in the lobby to keep watch. If Jennings or his companion were seen going up the lift earlier than expected, he would immediately call Jupe and Pete.

Bob sat in one of the wide leather chairs, trying to look as casual as possible, but with his heart pounding with excitement. He reached for a magazine and pretended to read it to avoid being too conspicuous. All in all, he wanted to give the impression of being a guest of the hotel waiting for someone—perhaps for the return of his friends who had just gone to the lifts and pressed the button.

Jupiter and Pete were lucky. With a ping, one of the doors opened immediately. Hurriedly the boys got inside and chose the ninth storey. As they roared upwards, they set their mobile phones to silent vibration and slipped them into their trouser pockets.

The ninth storey was even more elegant than the hotel lobby. “You can sink into this carpet,” said Pete.

The First Investigator cleared his throat. “Now go! Suite Number 908—over there.” He stayed behind to keep watch and took a seat in the common area near the lifts.

The dangerous and unpleasant task was carried out by Pete. Outside the door to the suite, he took a quick look around and pulled out his collection of lock picks. Fortunately for him, in this hotel, normal keys were still in use and not those specially coded chip cards.

As he went to work, his guilty conscience stirred. He told himself that in principle, he was not committing a burglary, but only recovering a stolen item. He would leave everything untouched except the parchment book.

He devoted himself to the lock with great concentration. There was a click, and the door opened. Still wondering how easy it had been, he slipped into the room, closed the door, and locked it back. The security standards in this posh place urgently needed to be reviewed.

Pete looked around. He was standing in a hallway. On the right, a half-open door led into a small bathroom. As he peeked inside, he was startled for a second—he saw his own reflection from a sparkling clean mirror. Anyway, Shulin would hardly have kept the book in the bathroom.

He walked on into the living room. He was amazed how cosy such a hotel suite could be. There was an extremely comfortable-looking leather couch with many cushions. On a flat platform stood a glass table with three chairs. A fresh bouquet of flowers shone in red and yellow. Behind it, in the semi-circular part of the room, stretched a wide window front with light blue curtains.

However, the document bag he was looking for was neither on the table nor on top of the small cabinet on which stood a widescreen TV. Next to the couch was a small side table, on which was only a mobile phone. On another side of the room, a stack of magazines was piled up on a writing desk with drawers.

Pete's heart beat faster. He felt anything but comfortable, even though the two occupants were not expected to return so soon.

He opened a closed door and entered a bedroom. On the wide double bed, the blankets lay untidy and crumpled. One look at the bedside tables on either side—nothing. Another door led from the bedroom to a second bathroom.

The Second Investigator called himself to order. Where would he put the book if he were Shulin? Certainly not in the bathroom. By the bed? No, the parchment book was not bedtime reading material. Pete thought it might be in the room safe, which he assumed was in the wardrobe, so he opened it next.

Hanging neatly in the wardrobe were several shirts and dresses. Among them, a pristine white jacket immediately drew his attention. Upon closer inspection, he recognized that it was a martial arts jacket. Notably, a badge stitched onto the left side was that of a Taekwondo organization. Also on the hanger were a pair of white pants and a belt. The belt was black, adorned with six white stripes at each end. That was a 6th dan black belt!

The question arose as to whom this uniform belonged—Alan Jennings, a man in his mid-forties, or Shulin, likely in her mid- to late-twenties. Also, Pete pondered the rationale behind someone bringing a martial arts uniform to a hotel. In an open bag situated directly beneath the uniform, the Second Investigator discovered a head guard, a chest protector, gloves, shin guards, and shoes—all protective gear typically used in competitions.

Pete then noticed another interesting item in the bag—a Taekwondo membership card issued to Shulin Wu, a 29-year-old from New York, where Alan Jennings was from. That summed it all up! She was here for some competition. In any case, this served as a warning to Pete not to mess with her. One kick from her would send him flying across the room—just like in the movies.

Hold on a second! What was Pete thinking about? He was supposed to be searching for a parchment book, not examining clothing. He faltered and hurried out of the bedroom back to the living room.

“Think!” he urged himself. “Where would you...” He pressed his lips together such that it almost hurt. Without much hope, he went over to the writing desk and inspected the stack of magazines—they were only Taekwondo magazines, nothing else.

How could he have been so stupid? The four drawers below the desk, of course! All of them were big enough to store the document bag in! Pete quickly opened the first drawer and found a notepad and a fine leather folder with the hotel logo. In the next one were two phone books; the third was locked; and finally the fourth, which was completely empty.

The assumption was that the document bag was in the locked drawer—not only because it was a logical place to store it, but precisely because it was the only one that was locked. Well, he had picked the lock at the suite’s entrance, so this simple locked drawer shouldn’t be any more difficult.

Just then, the mobile phone in his trouser pocket began to vibrate. That could not be true... but never mind. Pete did not hesitate for a moment. It was now or never! If he answered the call, he would only lose more time. He pulled out his lock picks without even looking at his mobile phone.

He broke out in a sweat. A breath later, there was a click sound, and Pete was able to open the drawer. The document bag was indeed inside. Pete grabbed it, closed the drawer, and turned towards the exit. His mobile phone was still vibrating.

What if Shulin or Jennings were already out in the corridor? With the document bag tucked under his arm, Pete accepted the call.

“Get out!” Bob yelled at him. “Shulin is already in the lift!”

“Is she here yet?” Pete was in the suite’s hallway, standing next to the bathroom door. He only had two more steps to the door, but what if Shulin was already approaching?

“How would I know—” Bob continued, but Pete hung up in the middle of Bob’s explanation. He wanted to call Jupiter, but already the mobile was vibrating again. He answered the call.

“She’s here in the corridor,” Jupiter whispered—probably because the woman was near him. “You can’t get out!”

The Second Investigator threw himself around and, as silently as possible, hurried with three quick steps back into the living room. He was at a spot that was not visible from the hallway, but that only provided a few seconds of safety. He needed a hiding place!

Just then, the lock clicked and the entrance door swung open.

Pete was trapped!

5. Pete in Peril

Instinctively, the Second Investigator circled the couch and took cover behind it. Breathlessly he crouched on the floor and laid his head flat on the carpeted floor. Of course this hiding place was anything but secure, but why would Shulin look behind the couch? She had no reason to expect or look for an intruder.

Pete wondered why she had returned to the suite so quickly. The meal couldn't be over yet, so she should be leaving again soon. He just had to hold out a little, that was all.

The couch had elevated timber feet, so he could see through a gap of about fifteen centimetres under the piece of furniture. Shulin's feet appeared in the hallway, and she calmly entered the bathroom.

It was too risky to get out now. Meanwhile, he thought that he had better check the document bag for the parchment book. He was in luck. There were no locks on the bag, just a zip. He quietly unzipped it and there it was—in a transparent plastic bag was the parchment book. He took it out and zipped back the bag... and suddenly he froze.

The drawer! In his hurry, Pete had not locked it back. Anyway, now that he had got the parchment book, he might as well put the document bag back in the drawer and lock it. At least it would not be so obvious that someone had broken in.

As quietly as possible, the Second Investigator did that quickly and let himself sink back into his hiding place, relieved but with a racing pulse.

When the sound of a toilet flush was heard, he lay flat on the carpet again. It took only a few seconds before the woman's feet appeared in his field of vision, and with great relief, Pete saw her turn towards the exit.

It was almost over. He had missed being discovered by a hair's breadth, but wasn't that significant for him and his colleagues? The Three Investigators often found themselves in similar situations, but despite all their previous adventures, Pete still couldn't get used to it.

Suddenly, he heard a mobile phone ring.

By reflex, his hand flicked into his trouser pocket to shut the darn thing off. Only then did he realize that it couldn't be his phone as it was still set to silent vibration... anyway, it wasn't his ring tone either!

Shulin came closer—right at the couch!

Pete then remembered seeing a mobile phone on the small side table next to the couch. The ringing continued.

"Yeah?" said Shulin, and the couch jerked and creaked a little. The woman had sat down. That could not be true! Had he just considered this situation typical for him? No, it was always worse, and this was indeed typical!

Shulin leaned back. Pete could see the top of her hair. He was literally petrified in his hiding place. "Just don't move!" he thought to himself. "Just don't breathe too loudly!"

Shulin then put the mobile phone on speakerphone and laid it down on the side table. She then launched into a torrent of Chinese—at least Pete suspected it was Chinese. She sounded agitated, almost angry, but that was probably just her temperament. Pete also heard the caller replying—a male voice also speaking in the melodious foreign language.

At some point, it seemed like hours, but in reality it was probably just a minute or two, a different voice sounded—that of a young woman or girl, and she spoke in English: “Lin, when are you coming home?”

“It will take a little longer,” Shulin replied. “You know I have to prepare for the competition... and unfortunately, I don’t have much time left. Anyway, I have to go back to my dinner now. I’ll call you again later...” She said goodbye, hung up, and rushed out of the suite.

Relieved, Pete struggled out of his hiding place. It didn’t take a minute until a message from Jupiter arrived: ‘The coast is clear.’

Immediately, the Second Investigator left the suite. Jupe was already waiting eagerly when Pete triumphantly handed him the parchment book.

“Seven o’clock,” Pete noted when the three of them got back into the car and he drove off.

“It’s hard to believe how quickly everything happened,” Pete remarked. “This Jennings and the Taekwondo lady are still sitting in the hotel restaurant, feasting on their super expensive meal.”

“Taekwondo lady?” Bob wondered aloud.

Pete grinned and began to describe what he discovered in the suite, and his narrow escape.

“Your mission was successful—that’s what counts,” said Jupiter. “We have the book and we can finally wrest its mystery from it.”

“If there is even a mystery...” Bob wondered aloud.

“Of course there is! Jennings said it himself in the restaurant.”

“He spoke of a secret, Jupe. That could mean something completely different. I’m surprised that I have to point it out to you of all people.”

“Yeah, yeah...” Jupiter mumbled.

A few minutes later, The Three Investigators arrived back at Headquarters. They were eager to start examining the parchment book.

It was a little bigger than a normal paperback, more like a large-format, expensive hardcover book bound in brown, brittle leather. Jupiter noted that it smelled even more intense than the parchment sheets at Arthur’s stall at the craft fair.

Nothing was written on the cover. When Jupiter opened the book, it crunched softly and a tiny piece of the brittle leather crumbled off the spine.

“It’s often like that with old books,” Bob remarked.

There were fifteen parchment sheets bound in the book. The individual pages were slightly wavy. The first twelve sheets had text written on both sides, and the last three were blank. The text was meticulously inscribed by hand using Latin characters, rendered in a medieval European script.

“So this is the first written page...” Jupiter showed the page to his friends:

*Dû bist mîn, ih bin dîn.
des solt dû gewis sîn.
dû bist beslozen
in mînem herzen,
verlorn ist das sluzzellîn:
dû muost ouch immêr darinne sîn.*

“Ouch!” Pete cried.

“What’s wrong with you?” Bob was startled.

“I was reading out the one word I recognize in the last line,” Pete said. “What language is this anyway? German?”

“Not modern German,” Jupe explained. “We must not forget what we are dealing with... A parchment book is common in the European Middle Ages, so this is a text which is probably written in an ancient form of a European language—German, like you said.”

“Looks like a poem,” Bob noted, “but a very strange one.”

“How are we going to decipher this?” Pete remarked.

“I can search for it on the Internet...” Bob turned on the computer. “Jupe, show me the text again. I’ll start by keying in the first line and see what I can get.”

Jupiter passed the book to him. Very quickly Bob found what he was looking for. “It’s a Middle High German love poem,” he explained, “from something known as the ‘*Tegernsee* Letter Collection’. I found a translation of it:”

You are mine, I am yours.

You can be sure of that.

You are locked away

in my heart,

The key is lost:

You must remain there forever.

“My goodness!” Pete remarked. “Seriously, how are we going to proceed from here?”

Bob carefully compared word for word. “The text matches completely, so there really can’t be any mystery hidden in it. The arrangement of the lines also corresponds to the original. It seems that the text on this first page is the first of several connected verses. I suppose that the other pages contain the rest of the verses.”

“Bob, when were the poems written?” Jupiter asked.

“Uh... hold on...” Bob paused as he checked the Internet. “Okay, according to this source I found, they were written towards the end of the 12th century.”

Jupe added: “If you remember, Professor Mathewson said that this book was created around 120 years ago—so it is not from the 12th century. As of this moment, I am of the opinion that this is a copy of an original from that era...”

The First Investigator took back the book and continued leafing through it, checking to see if something might be hidden there... but he found nothing.

“We should try black light,” Pete suggested. “Maybe there’s something written somewhere with secret ink.”

“Good idea...” The First Investigator agreed and took the book into their laboratory.

Black light, a form of ultraviolet light, emitted electromagnetic radiation and could uncover hidden writings if the ink used contained phosphorescent materials.

However, when the Three Investigators illuminated each page with a black light lamp, they did not find anything hidden.

“What else could we try?” Bob asked. “Maybe take the leather binding off?”

“Forget it!” Pete argued. “We must not damage the book—at least not without permission from Professor Mathewson.”

“Note that Jennings didn’t do that either,” Jupiter added, “and he still managed to uncover some sort of secret... or do you seriously think he removed the cover and fixed it

back such that no one would notice?" His friends could not contradict this.

Jupiter sighed and reached for his phone. In all the excitement, he had completely forgotten to let the Mathewsons know that they had recovered the stolen item. Before dialling Barbara's number, the First Investigator switched on the loudspeaker so that his colleagues could listen in.

It only rang twice before the call was answered. "Yeah?"

"Barbara, we have good news!"

"What?" She sounded excited. "You found the book?"

"Exactly. We are—"

"Super! My father will be happy! So I had made the right decision!"

"What decision?"

"The decision to hire you three!"

He could literally see her grinning with her chin up. "Of course, you can say it that way."

"Let's share the glory," Pete suggested.

"What?" cried Barbara.

"Oh, nothing," Jupiter interrupted. "Listen, what do you think about giving the book back to your father first thing tomorrow? He might be able to answer some questions about it."

"Questions about the book?" She sounded confused.

"Exactly. When can we meet?"

"Is Pete coming too?" she asked instead of an answer.

Jupiter grinned widely. Bob slapped Pete on the shoulders. The Second Investigator didn't look very enthusiastic.

"Yes, of course," assured Jupiter. "Our friend is always with us, and how could he miss this meeting?"

"Very well... Shall we say nine o'clock tomorrow morning, at our house? And don't forget the book."

"Pete will personally hand it back to you." Even before the First Investigator had finished speaking, she hung up.

"She fancies you, Pete," Bob said.

"No comments!" Pete cried. "I've really been through enough for today!"

"She's so taken with you that she specifically asks for you," Bob continued, unperturbed.

The Second Investigator stretched out his hands defensively. "All right! We'd better get back to the book."

"You're right," Bob agreed. "You better take a good look at this..." He pointed to the first page with the poem.

"Why? Have you found a lead?" Pete asked.

"Not for our problem," Bob clarified, "but for yours. This is a lovely love poem that you can read to a professor's daughter."

"Very funny, Bob," Pete countered. "Let's rather ask ourselves if there is anything else we can do with this book. Is there something in the cover? Does it make sense to read the first word on each page... or does—"

"How come you're suddenly bursting with ideas?" Jupiter asked.

"Anything is better than wondering how I am going to meet Barbara tomorrow morning. She's not exactly my type... I mean, it doesn't really matter... She's a nice girl... and that's the thing. Well, not that you think I'm remotely interested in her—"

The remaining words were drowned in the laughter of his two friends.

The night dragged on. The Three Investigators had dealt with so many secret messages that they were confident that they could find something.

Bob suggested looking at the remainder of the written pages. They took digital photos of each written page, enlarged them on the computer, and compared each word with Internet sources to determine whether there were missing or added characters. There was nothing.

Eventually, they gave up. It was unlikely that the book contained hidden messages, just as Barbara's father had claimed. Jupiter, in particular, was particularly annoyed that he couldn't unravel the secret that Alan Jennings had found. So why had Jennings and Shulin stolen the book? Could it be that the secret was not about a hidden message?

6. The Professor has a Suspicion

The next morning, Pete drove his MG to pick up Bob before going to the salvage yard to get Jupiter.

The First Investigator greeted his friends with a hearty yawn. "About time, fellas." He allowed himself a tired look at his watch. "Five past nine. We just missed getting to the Mathewsons' house on time at nine."

"We'll think of a good excuse," said Pete.

Bob rubbed his eyes. "How about: 'We only got to bed at three o'clock early this morning because we were examining the parchment book on your behalf, Professor Mathewson'? I think that sounds good enough."

Jupiter let himself fall onto the back seat. "We also have to tell him that we haven't made any progress."

"I think we have made a huge step forward," Pete said. "After all, we recovered the stolen item within one day... and I have risked getting beaten up by a 6th dan Taekwondo exponent."

"I wouldn't put it quite so drastically," Jupiter countered. "I hardly think that Shulin would have sent you to the hospital."

"No harm for me to exaggerate a little," Pete remarked and drove off with squealing tyres.

"I am not exaggerating at all to say that we risk getting injured because of your reckless driving," Bob said.

"How about you get out and walk there instead?" grumbled the Second Investigator.

"Nice to note that we are all in such a good mood this morning!" Jupiter remarked sarcastically.

Pete did not answer, but drove more slowly. "Sorry," he murmured. "I haven't been sleeping well."

"—From dreaming about Barbara?" Bob asked.

"No, from my colleagues who make stupid comments about Barbara."

Now it was Bob who apologized.

Over the next five minutes, until they reached their destination, the mood between them improved, so The Three Investigators were in better spirits when they arrived.

It was surprisingly hot for such an early hour. The coolness of the living room with its rows of bookshelves came at just the right moment, when Barbara led her visitors in. She told the boys that she was feeling much better and that she had 'beaten her cold'... whatever that meant.

Today she wore an airy lemon-yellow dress that would have looked great if it weren't for her worn-out slippers and white stockings. She had tied her brown curls back with a hair tie at the nape of her neck. Anyway, she kept casting nervous glances at Pete, probably thinking that he would not notice. A thin cord at her neck slipped over the edge of the dress. Pete narrowed his eyes briefly, as if to dispel a hallucination. Even at home, she was actually wearing the old-fashioned pouch she had used as a purse at the craft fair.

Pete promptly handed the parchment book to Barbara, who gave him a wide smile of thanks. "My father will be down here soon," she told the three boys. "He still has to—" She was interrupted because, at that moment, the professor appeared.

"So you really found the book?" The professor remarked as he took the book from his daughter. "An amazing achievement, boys! You can count on me to recommend The Three Investigators to my acquaintances, should any of them need a crime investigated. Where did you find it? You did not tell Barbara everything... or if you did, she didn't tell me." He glanced at his daughter, who just grinned.

"The thief was actually Alan Jennings," Jupiter said.

Mathewson's eyes widened. "Jennings? How could he? He was with me during the theft, I mean..." He shook his head, not finishing his garbled sentence. He was clearly upset by it all.

"To be more precise, it was carried out by an accomplice of his—a woman by the name of Shulin Wu," explained Jupiter. "She was responsible for the break-in—at least that's what we suspect, as everything points to that."

"Have you notified the police yet?"

"Not yet, sir. We have been trying to clear everything up, but there are still some questions."

"Barbara has already hinted at this. So how can I help you?"

His daughter got up without another word and left the room. Pete looked at her in surprise.

"We are convinced that the book hides a secret, sir," Jupiter began, explaining how they came to this conclusion. "What Mr Jennings said in the restaurant proves it conclusively... so there must be more to it."

The professor leafed through the book. "All well and good, boys, but I don't see what I could do for you. You are the investigators, and the mere fact that I am now holding the book in my hand again proves to me that you know something about your work."

From the next room, they could hear glasses clinking together.

"What I'm saying though," Mathewson continued, "is that I cannot tell you anything about the book that you have not already figured out."

"We spent half the night with the texts and compared them with what we found on the Internet," Bob said. "There are no discrepancies, apart from some punctuation marks here and there."

"I know! There is nothing special about that."

"If it is not the text," Bob said, "how else could someone have hidden a secret message in the book? That's our question, Professor. You know your way around this. Is the parchment book larger than usual? Or smaller? Or is there something wrong with the cover? What about the binding?"

Before Mathewson could answer, Barbara came back. She balanced a tray with five glasses and a blue plastic carafe in which ice cubes were jingling. "I got us some orange juice." She handed out the glasses—the first one went to Pete. "What have I missed? I think it's all super exciting."

"The activities of an investigator are not always exciting," Jupiter explained precociously. "Sometimes research, including the necessary thinking, can be very tiring and boring until you find the right lead."

"I can tell you a thing or two about that," Bob added.

"I would love to hear from you, Robert," Barbara said.

"Robert?" grunted Bob.

“That’s your real name, isn’t it?”

“Sure... but nobody calls me that... apart from my mum.”

She grinned and smiled at Pete. One could hardly overlook that she was actually interested in him anyway. She had probably just wanted to be polite to Bob, even if it hadn’t worked out.

Barbara filled all the glasses without being asked.

In the meantime, the professor continued to leaf through the book. Jupiter took the opportunity to point out that they used a black light lamp to scan each page for hidden text.

“You used ultraviolet light?” the professor remarked.

“Yes, but we did not find anything,” Jupiter replied, but he did not miss the professor’s reaction. “Is something wrong, sir?”

“Hmm...” He did not answer but tilted his head and held the page right in front of his nose. Then he mumbled something so quietly that no one could hear it. He hurried to the window and pulled the curtain aside. Holding the book up to the light, he meticulously examined several pages. “I don’t believe it!”

Jupiter came up beside the professor. The First Investigator still couldn’t see anything unusual.

The next moment, the professor turned around and announced: “Finish your drinks, guys... and then follow me to the University of Los Angeles.”

“To your university, sir?” Pete asked.

“Yes, to check on something there. I’d better call Frank right away.”

“Frank?”

“A colleague of mine.” The professor closed the book. “He can give me... you’ll see! You’ll come with me, won’t you?”

“Of course!” cried Barbara from the table.

Mathewson smiled at his daughter. “I think today could turn out to be quite exciting!”

7. What is a Palimpsest?

Although The Three Investigators didn't even understand what the professor was getting at, less than five minutes later, the three of them were crammed into the back seat of Mathewson's black Chevrolet Impala. The dark leather seats smelled like they had just been conditioned. A green scented tree dangled from the interior mirror.

Barbara got into the passenger seat. Instead of her worn-out slippers, she was now wearing sports shoes with mismatched colours—one blue, the other red—paired with lime-green socks. It was evident that the girl had weird fashion tastes.

However, Pete's attention was on the Impala. "What a crazy car this is!"

"This is a real classic car!" Barbara remarked. "It's a 1967 model with a V8 engine. Today's Impalas are visually boring to look at! At least this one has a bonnet that looks good!"

Pete was quite astonished. Apparently the girl had many surprises up her sleeve.

Jupiter, on the other hand, was not in the least interested in the car. Instead, he asked the professor what he had discovered, but Mathewson just waved off and started the engine. "You'll see."

The car rolled out of the garage, which Mathewson closed again by remote control. He turned onto the road and headed for the highway.

However, Jupiter was not so easily turned away. "Professor, what is it that you are going to do at the university?"

"I'm going to run some tests on the book," Mathewson said.

"Why?" Jupe asked.

"—Because I suspect that wretched Jennings did something with it!"

"—And what did he do exactly?"

"You'll find out when we get to the university because I'm going to do exactly the same thing as Jennings did! By the way, what exactly did he say in the restaurant?"

"The book has revealed its secret."

"Wonderful!" Mathewson seemed in high spirits. "Then we shall find out the secret as well!"

Very soon, the Chevrolet Impala rolled into the university's staff car park. The Three Investigators followed the professor and his daughter across the campus, which was almost deserted on this Sunday morning, except for a few students here and there.

The professor led them to a concrete building that was as large as it was ugly. The signboard on the building said: 'School of Mining & Geology'.

"Mining and Geology?" Barbara wondered aloud. "Dad, I thought your office was at the Historical Institute. What are we doing here?"

"We're going to meet Frank Kelham, my colleague," the professor replied. "He promised me on the phone that he would be here by the time we arrive. He lives very close to the university."

Inside the building was even more deserted. Mathewson headed for a lift. After all of them entered the cabin, the professor pressed the button for the third storey.

“Why do you need to meet him?” Jupiter started to probe again.

“He will provide me access to the necessary equipment.”

“I still don’t understand anything,” said Pete.

“Yes, stop being so secretive, Dad!” demanded Barbara.

“I am not sure myself... but it won’t be long before we’ll know more. Maybe I’m wrong.”

The lift stopped and the doors slid apart. The professor was the first to leave the cabin. “The equipment that I want is located here... Look, all of you, I will answer your questions later, but for now, let me do what I have to do first, okay?”

In a dreary corridor lined with doors stretched out before them, Mathewson knocked on one of them and opened it immediately.

A grey-haired man spun around in a chair on casters, stood up, and went towards the visitors.

“Nicolas,” he greeted Barbara’s father.

“Hey, Frank, thanks for coming down on a Sunday,” the professor replied and introduced the rest of them to his colleague. “Let’s get down to business straight away.”

“You’re not really telling me that all this time there was a palimpsest in your possession and you didn’t notice it?” Frank Kelham asked.

The Three Investigators cast questioning looks at each other.

Mathewson smiled narrow-lipped. “Yes, Frank... exactly that! At least I suspect so. The side is thinner and the surface irregular.”

“Citric acid and pumice?”

“I assume so. You can’t smell anything anymore, but it’s been a long time.”

“What are they talking about?” Bob whispered, and then turned to Barbara. “Do you know what your father—”

“I have never heard of that word before, but he often utters incomprehensible gibberish.” She rolled her eyes and fiddled with the strap of her pouch. “What did he say? A ‘pumice set’?”

“Palimpsest,” Jupiter corrected her. “At least I was listening, even if I don’t know that word. In fact, I do not have the slightest idea what that has to do with citric acid and pumice.”

“That coming from you really shocks me!” Pete remarked.

“Pete, there’s always something new to learn every day, if you want to improve,” Jupe countered.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Pete replied. “Today I learned that our master investigator does not know what a ‘pumpkin set’ is.”

“A palimpsest, Pete... Palimpsest.”

“Yeah, that too! Ha! Ha! Ha!” Pete laughed. “Lighten up, Jupe. You don’t even know what that word means.”

“I’m going to find that out for sure.”

“When you finally do, please spare us the details!” Pete quipped.

Meanwhile, the two researchers continued their discussions.

“All right, I’ll get going,” Mr Kelham finally said and took the parchment book into another room with a rectangular glass opening on the door. Above the door was a sign that said ‘Laboratory’.

Professor Mathewson turned to the four of them and grinned happily. “Well, we will now wait here and see what we get from the tests!”

“You could use this time to finally explain to us what we are doing here!” Barbara’s patience had run out. “—But one thing, Dad... just keep your lecture short. We’re not here to

sit for your final exam... well, at least not me!”

Mr Mathewson ignored his daughter’s mockery. As he was about to begin his lecture, Bob took out his notebook to jot down the important points.

“In order for me to explain to you what a palimpsest is, we have to talk about the parchment first... Parchment is a porous material of collagen fibres. A common type of ink used on it is the iron gall ink. When the ink is applied on the surface, some of the ink’s chemical or physical components seep into the parchment through capillary action.

“Now, imagine that you no longer require some written content. Today, if the content were on paper, one might simply crumple and throw it away. However, in the Middle Ages, things were different when there was no paper, and a parchment sheet was extremely valuable. You wouldn’t discard parchment just like that.”

“We’ve heard something about this from Arthur, the parchment maker,” Bob said. “He said that parchment Bibles could be more expensive than an entire monastery.”

Mathewson nodded. “For parchments, it would be repurposed. This was possible due to a unique characteristic that sets it apart from modern paper. Parchment is notably thick. Its top layer could be removed to erase the existing content. Subsequently, the surface can be smoothed, effectively restoring the parchment to a blank state, ready for reuse.”

Jupiter whistled quietly. “So, I suppose that’s what citric acid and pumice are for, as your colleague mentioned earlier?”

“Yes, citric acid or other weak acids like lemon juice were used to help fade or remove the ink, while pumice stone was used to smooth the parchment surface after the original writing had been erased.”

“Then you could rewrite on the parchment again?” Bob asked.

“Exactly!” Mathewson replied. “Such a repurposed parchment sheet is called a palimpsest. The word is derived from the Greek word *palímpsēstos*—a compound word basically meaning ‘to scrape smooth again’.

“However, even after the surface layer is removed, as in a palimpsest, there can still be traces of the ink within the fibrous structure of the material. So we now come to the crux of the matter—you can use modern technology to make the scraped-off content visible again.”

“Wow, scraped off, but still readable again?” Bob repeated, fascinated.

“Yes,” Mathewson continued. “When Jupiter said that the three of you used black light to scan the pages, it made me realize that a palimpsest could be in play here. Ultraviolet light is a traditional and highly effective tool for revealing erased content in a palimpsest. It works with the optical properties of the parchment and ink. UV light causes the parchment to fluoresce. The traces of the ink, which contains metallic compounds or other organic materials that do not fluoresce, appear darker against the fluorescing parchment.”

“—But we didn’t detect anything when we scanned the pages with UV light,” Bob said.

“Yes, if UV light does not work, there could be several reasons, for example, the ink was completely removed; or an incompatible ink type was used; or there were obscuring coatings or treatments to the parchment that block the UV reaction.

“However, in this case, my best guess is the degradation and chemical changes of ink and parchment over time. Over a century, the residual ink compounds may have degraded to the point that they no longer interact with UV light in a way that creates the necessary contrast.

“This is where XRF spectroscopy comes in. XRF stands for ‘X-ray fluorescence’. It is a non-destructive technique used to detect the ink’s fundamental chemical composition, which remains even after the optical properties are gone. A high-energy X-ray beam is directed at the page. This causes the atoms in the ink remnants to emit secondary X-rays at a specific wavelength unique to each element, such as iron.

“The collected data are processed by computer software to create a map showing the distribution of specific elements. From here, we can generate an image of erased text on a palimpsest, if any.”

“Fascinating,” added Jupiter. “So is that what Mr Kelham is doing in the lab there?”

“Yes,” the professor said. “However, there is a catch to this. Lower concentrations of trace elements require longer measurement times to achieve sufficient accuracy. You can get a basic idea of the composition within minutes of scanning a specific area, while comprehensive, high-precision results might require a longer time—which could be anything from hours to days per page.”

“Days!” Jupiter exclaimed.

“—Per page,” the professor emphasized, “but let’s see what Frank comes up with.”

“Oh my,” Bob remarked. “Alan Jennings would be long gone by then.”

“—But I am asking Frank to do it slightly differently,” Mathewson said. “As I have told you earlier, this book was created as a curio item, so I assume that the texts were written by the creator. Later, if someone else inserted a message in there, and then erased it, then it would very likely be in one of the three blank sheets.”

“—So you asked Mr Kelham to work on the blank sheets first?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes,” the professor confirmed, “and there is yet another approach I’ve discussed with him. He’s going to use a portable XRF spectrometer where quick and general results are displayed on-screen almost immediately. Then he will see if he needs to use the benchtop instrument for a more detailed analysis.”

Just then, Frank Kelham came out of the lab and he looked excited. “Good news! I did a preliminary scan on all the pages and I found something on the first blank page, as you suspected, Nicolas...”

“Oh wow!” Barbara exclaimed. “It really has a hidden message! Can we see it now?”

“Not really,” Mr Kelham said. “The data from the portable XRF is not enough for me to generate an image out of it.”

“We just want to get an image that is clear enough to allow us to read the original, erased text,” Professor Mathewson said. “Can you use the benchtop spectrometer?”

“That’s what I am about to do,” Kelham said. “I should be able to get a more accurate set of data. Then I’ll convert the raw data into a greyscale image for initial viewing. I think there is a good chance that will give you what you want. Good thing I only have to do it for one page. From my preliminary scan, I suspect that there is only one erased layer. If there are multiple layers, then the analysis could run into days.”

“Fantastic!” Professor Mathewson was audibly thrilled. “With a medieval palimpsest, it would be much more difficult! Thanks, Frank, please proceed!”

“All right, I’ll get going... and Nicolas, could you come into the lab and help me set up the equipment?”

The two men then went into the lab.

8. The Hidden Message

Outside the lab, The Three Investigators stood next to a large potted plant and put their heads together.

“So it’s about an old text that someone has erased off,” Bob said. “Pretty complicated, if you ask me. Why not tear out the page if you want to make a text disappear... or burn the whole book? After all, as Barbara’s father clearly said, we are no longer living in the Middle Ages... and the book is not worth that much.”

Jupiter shook his head. “You’ve got it all wrong, Bob! It wasn’t just about removing the unwanted text, rather, it’s about hiding the text in a very special way—a way that allows anyone who knows about it to make it readable again. Just think about it—effectively, someone had hidden a message inside the book so cleverly that it even escaped us.”

“Whoop-de-doo! ... And that’s saying something!” Barbara quipped.

“There is no need for mockery,” Jupiter countered.

“Okay, okay... I was deeply impressed when you found the parchment book so quickly, but now it’s about something else—who hid a message in this way... and who was it meant for?”

“Clearly it was meant for someone who currently knows about it,” Pete suggested, “perhaps Alan Jennings and Shulin. They stole the book to get the message.”

“Yes, they knew about it, but the message might not be meant for them,” Bob countered.

“Hmm...” Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “Barbara, I remember that your father said that he had the book for ten years. Before that, it was lying in some flea market, and no one cared about it. I think the message is much older. If we knew when the text was scraped off, that would help us.”

Just then, Professor Mathewson came back out from the lab.

“Dad!” Barbara called out. “We have a question for you... Since when has it been possible to make scraped text visible again?”

Jupiter was amazed at how quickly Barbara had understood, as this was precisely the crucial question that could narrow down the time period during which the unknown person must have hidden the message. Scraping the parchment only made sense if the person had known that the original text could be made visible again.

However, what the professor said dashed all hopes of getting closer to the secret in this way. “Oh, it’s been going on for a long time,” the professor said. “The earliest methods for recovering text from palimpsests involved manual and chemical techniques, which were often invasive and caused permanent damage to the manuscripts. Examples of chemicals used are gallic acid extract and hydrochloric acid.”

“When were UV and XRF used for analyzing palimpsests then?” Barbara asked.

“Hmm...” The professor thought for a while. “As far as I know, UV was available in the mid-19th century, but as to whether it was used for palimpsests, I don’t know. XRF came later, in the early 20th century, and it was first used for analyzing geological materials.”

“That would mean that uncovering erased text was already possible when this parchment book was made, irrespective of the method used.” Barbara said.

“A hundred and twenty years ago? For sure! Why do you ask?”

“Just wanted to know...” his daughter waved. Jupiter was sufficiently impressed by Barbara as she had shown that she had a sharp mind.

“I understand,” said Mathewson benignly. “Okay, I’ll tell you what... the four of you stay here while I go to my office to do a bit of work. I’ll come back in about an hour’s time, otherwise if Frank comes out earlier, call me.”

“Okay, Dad.”

With that, the professor left and all the rest of them could do was to wait. On and off, Jupiter went to the glass window to take a look inside. Nothing could be seen except for Mr Kelham bending over his equipment.

“This opens new perspectives...” Jupiter said, “and at the same time, it gives rise to a theory—someone who knew about palimpsests hid a message on that page. It could even have been the parchment maker himself—Arthur’s ancestor...”

“—Or a subsequent owner of the book,” Bob added. “The question remains as to how Jennings and Shulin knew about it. Was it perhaps intended for them after all?”

“As interesting as all this is, we will have to wait and see,” said Jupiter. “I hope that we’ll be able to uncover something once we can read the text.”

The hour seemed like an eternity to them. Eventually, Professor Mathewson came back into the room. “Let’s hope it will be soon,” he said.

“Any longer and I’ll burst with curiosity!” said Barbara.

“I am still very puzzled,” the professor continued. “As we know, the palimpsest was common centuries ago... but in that parchment book of mine is probably the most recent palimpsest I’ve ever heard of. As I told you earlier, that book is only about 120 years old. At that time, there was actually no obvious reason to make a palimpsest...”

“—Unless it was specifically done to hide a message...” Jupe said, while pinching his lower lip.

“In this case,” the professor added, “it was done so skilfully that you wouldn’t suspect it unless you look very closely and know that such a technique was even possible.”

Just then, Frank Kelham opened the door and came out. “Got it!”

The Three Investigators and Barbara crowded around Mr Kelham who was holding a printed page of a greyscale image.

“Oh wow!” Barbara exclaimed. “It worked!”

On the parchment page that had been blank, characters now appeared. They were written in a modern script—not the medieval European one in the other pages. However, the characters were a bit fuzzy, nevertheless, they were large enough and clearly legible for reading:

*Three Steps to the Treasure.
Go to Rocky Beach Town Hall.
Look for File RM311.*

*g t t e i l o t e h r f u d r n c e k h p a u
17 46 66 70 97 108 124 131 156 166 188*

“Treasure?” Barbara was the first to speak out. “What does that mean?”

“When Alan Jennings and Shulin went out of their way to steal the book, at least one thing was clear,” Pete said. “There is something valuable!”

“That’s why it’s called a treasure,” Bob said dryly. For safe-keeping, he promptly photographed the image several times and then looked at the result of his efforts on the display of his mobile phone’s camera. “The photos turned out well. You can see everything clearly! If I could understand it now, I would be completely satisfied.”

“So, it’s a treasure hunt after all,” Jupiter stated. “Fellas, this is getting more interesting!”

“So far, so good,” Barbara continued. “It proves that our reasoning is correct. Someone deliberately hid this message for someone else to make it visible again...”

“It says ‘Rocky Beach Town Hall’,” Pete noted. “I thought it was called ‘City Hall’?”

“It’s the same building, Pete,” Bob explained. “Remember, this message was written over a hundred years ago. Originally, the building was called ‘Town Hall’. Many years later, when operations expanded, the city council decided to renovate the building. The administration then temporarily relocated to that ugly City Administration building, remember?”

“Uh-huh...” Pete mumbled.

“In the renovation, the façade and most of the outer walls were retained to preserve key historical elements,” Bob continued, “while the back of the building was reconstructed and extended to cater for more office space. On completion, the administration moved back to the building and it was then renamed ‘Rocky Beach City Hall’. Anyway, many people still call it the ‘Town Hall’.”

“Okay,” Pete said, “but would they have retained files from over a hundred years ago?”

“You’re right, Pete,” Bob gasped. “I guess we will have to go there to find out. If the old files were destroyed, we won’t be able to get more information about the treasure.”

“Also, what do the two rows of characters below the message mean?” Barbara asked. “Is there a code hidden in these letters... or in the numbers? The only thing that is immediately obvious is that the numbers are in ascending order.”

“We could ponder about it,” said Jupiter. “Maybe something will come up later. At least we have an immediate clue to follow up—a file number at City Hall! We should look there first.”

Barbara’s eyes glowed. “It is the first of three steps to the treasure, but what are the others?”

“One step at a time,” said Jupiter. “We must not rush things. In City Hall, or rather in this file, we will hopefully be able to get the next step. Then perhaps these letters and numbers will also make sense.”

“The only trouble is that Jennings and Shulin know about this too—since yesterday,” Pete said. “If they haven’t choked on their *Chateaubriand*, which I’d like them to, they’re many hours ahead of us! Also, if they have now found out that the parchment book is missing from the document bag, they won’t want to waste much time.”

“Don’t forget today is Sunday, a day when City Hall is not open to the public,” Jupiter added. “If Mr Jennings couldn’t wait until tomorrow, he’d have to break in.”

“Do you think he’d have any qualms about that?” Pete asked.

“Certainly not,” the First Investigator replied, “but I don’t think he’ll take that risk. Tomorrow, he can gain access more easily by using his status as a researcher and asking to see the archives officially... which I don’t think anyone will deny him.” Jupiter grinned widely.

“I can tell from the tone of your voice that a brilliant idea is popping into your head,” Bob said.

“Really?” asked Jupiter innocently. “We will use our home advantage! There are three steps... and I tell you that by the end of today, the score will be one-nil to The Three Investigators!”

The Chevrolet Impala purred softly like a cat when Jupiter dialled the number of the Rocky Beach Police Department on his mobile phone. They had just left the city traffic behind them and headed for the highway that would take them back to Rocky Beach.

"Cotta," Jupiter heard after the first ring, as if the inspector had been sitting next to his telephone.

"This is Jupiter Jones, sir."

The inspector audibly sighed. "Have you ever thought of taking the weekend off from whatever you're up to? What is it now?"

"It's not easy to explain."

"How could it be otherwise when you call? That is one of the things I learned over the years."

Jupiter cleared his throat. "Yes. Well, the thing is... we have to go to City Hall."

"Sure, you can go there," Cotta replied. "The building was still there when I drove past it this morning. It hasn't moved."

"I mean, we need to go inside City Hall."

"It opens tomorrow morning at eight o'clock."

"We need to get to City Hall urgently."

"Today?"

"We can be there in an hour."

"—And how do you imagine that? I am a police officer, not a mayor. You know very well that City Hall is closed on Sundays."

"That's why I'm calling you, sir. We need your help. It's very important."

"Unless there's a criminal locked in the toilet there, waiting to be put behind bars, I honestly don't think much of it."

"Please trust me, Inspector. It's important to our investigation of a case."

"If there were a crime linked to City Hall, I wouldn't be sitting behind my desk working through mountains of boring files."

"Oh, there is a crime, sir," Jupiter assured him, "and I am confident that we will be able to get one over on the criminal... more precisely, the criminals... if you help us."

For a few seconds, there was silence at the other end of the line. "City Hall in an hour?"

"Right. Of course, a little later would also be—"

"I'll call the Second Councillor and get back to you... but just be there on time! One o'clock."

"Thank you, sir."

"Imagine the things I have to do to get you three off my back!" The phone clicked.

Jupiter was satisfied. "All right. I am sure that we will get into City Hall today. Inspector Cotta will make it possible. Sometimes he is a bit grumpy but always helpful... We will need your help for this, Professor Mathewson. Could you tell the city councillor that you have an urgent need to look through the old files? As this is undoubtedly a matter of long ago, I believe they should not deny you access on privacy grounds. Besides, Cotta would vouch for us."

"You're pretty determined, huh?" Mathewson remarked.

Jupiter felt a slight blush rise in his face. "I mean, of course, only if you agree to it... It serves to find the truth, but we have to be faster than Jennings and find whatever is at the end of this treasure hunt. If we gain an advantage now, that can only be good, because Mr

Jennings is undoubtedly way ahead of us in one thing—he knows what he is looking for... we don't."

Barbara turned halfway around in the front seat. "You will play along, won't you, Dad... won't you?" She tilted her head slightly and looked at him with big eyes, which her father in turn could not see because he was concentrating on the traffic.

"Of course," said the professor. "The phrase 'urgent research' often works wonders, especially in small cities like Rocky Beach. People here are happy for any kind of attention."

"Hopefully, the same will be true for a city councillor torn from his weekend leisure," Jupe remarked.

9. The First Step

“So it’s you guys, right?” The man introduced himself as William Baker and was a giant of a man. Judging from his build and muscle mass, he could have easily passed for a heavyweight boxer... or a walking refrigerator. “I tell you, if Cotta hadn’t called, I’d be lying on the couch right now.”

“We thank you very much for your efforts,” Jupiter said.

“If Cotta vouches for you, everything will be fine, right?” William Baker unlocked the main entrance to City Hall. “However, I have to write something in the log book as to why I let you in.”

“We understand that, of course,” Jupiter assured him.

“So, five of you, right?” Ending his sentences with ‘right?’ seemed to be a habit of his. “Anyway, you have to write down your names and the reason why you need to enter City Hall so urgently—on a Sunday.”

Mathewson stepped forward and presented Mr Baker with his business card. “I am a researcher at the University of Los Angeles, and I urgently need to take a look at some archived files.”

“So, a researcher...” Baker repeated. “Which files are important for your research? As you probably know, you are not officially allowed to have access to the more recent files, right?”

Bob found himself counting the number of ‘rights’ coming from the walking refrigerator. “We want to look at File RM311,” Bob said. “It’s probably an old record.”

The city councillor whistled as he exhaled. “My word! According to our classification system, that file is at least one hundred years old. That should be stored in our basement.”

“Is that a problem?” Mathewson asked.

“No, no, but first things first... you have to fill out a form, right?” The councillor went behind the reception counter and rummaged through a filing cabinet. “Nowadays, everything has to be recorded bureaucratically. Here it is, the darn document.” He tore a green sheet from a printed pad and placed it in front of the visitors.

The professor started filling the form.

“Well, if you have any questions about Rocky Beach, I’m happy to answer,” Mr Baker offered.

“Thank you, but not at the moment,” Mathewson said, without pausing in his writing. “You could just show us the way to the archives.”

“You know, I haven’t been down there in a long time. In fact, nobody really needs to go down there anymore. Ha! The only thing older than those files is probably the basement itself, right?”

“Older? Basement?” Bob wondered aloud. “I thought this place was renovated a couple of years ago.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Mr Baker said. “The renovation was for new office rooms, and an extension at the back of the building to house a multi-function hall and an auditorium. We left the basement alone.”

“—But what about the files there?” Bob continued. “Are they still intact?”

“They should be,” Mr Baker said. “During the renovation, we moved all the stuff out. On completion of the works, we moved them back to the same place. It’s just a wonder that the council decided to keep them—for whatever reason. Nobody cares about those old files anymore, right?”

Jupiter thought that this would change abruptly. Jennings and Shulin would certainly be interested to go down there. “You can do us a favour after all, sir,” he said.

“—And what would that be?”

“If anyone else comes tomorrow and wants to see the file, don’t say we were here.”

“So you want to keep it a secret... but what is all this about? The paper chase of a research project, right?”

“Something like that,” Mathewson replied.

Mr Baker nodded. “You know what? You’ll have lots of fun looking for that file. It might even take you hours... Anyway, I’ll tell you what I’ll do... I will give you the key to that room and show you the way to the basement archives. After you’re done, just put the key in the drawer here. Then go out through this back exit.” He pointed diagonally behind him at a glass door without turning around. “It falls into the lock by itself. Then I won’t have to wait here until you’ve done. Normally I shouldn’t be allowed to leave your side, but since the inspector has vouched for you, I can surely save myself the trouble, right?”

“That will work,” Jupiter said.

Shortly afterwards, they went down an old stone staircase to the basement of City Hall. Bare light bulbs hung from the ceiling. A fist-sized spider scurried away over the stone wall.

William Baker handed Mathewson an oversized, rusty key. “At the end of the corridor, it’s the door on the left. The shelves are arranged more or less systematically by year.”

“That’s not much use to us if we don’t know the year of our file,” Bob said, struggling hard not to add ‘right?’ at the end of his remark.

“The only way to find out is to search and figure it out.” A quiet chuckle followed. “You’ll have to look in every year. I know it’s not the ideal system, but I didn’t create it, so no accusations, right? Well, have fun!” With that, Baker said goodbye.

Mathewson unlocked the door at the end of the corridor. A musty smell hit them. He flipped a switch, causing an old fluorescent tube to flicker to life.

“Sheesh...” Pete hissed as he entered the room. “They could have at least renovated this basement.”

“—Perhaps they ran out of funds,” Bob suspected. “The condition of this place is clearly not suitable to keep old archives.”

Before them stood a daunting long row of shelves which sagged under the weight of the files. Fixed on various parts of the shelves were weathered labels with faintly legible dates in reverse chronological order, starting from 1930.

Professor Mathewson laughed. “I know this from a lot of old archives I’ve visited. Look, the shelves are placed on wooden pallets—makeshift and rotten, but better than nothing.”

“—But one day this will rot and collapse,” Bob remarked.

“By then the present officials will no longer be in service and therefore cannot be held accountable.” Mathewson said. “You wouldn’t believe what’s out there.”

“Let’s start searching,” Bob urged.

“I’ve struggled through archives like this before,” the professor said. “The best thing is to split up. We look for RM311 in every year’s files. Have fun with it.”

When Jupiter pulled out a file to start off, two beetles dropped from underneath it. They fell right onto his feet. Startled, he let go of the file, which opened up in mid-air. The pages

scattered around him. “This is starting off well.” As the insects crawled away, he bent down to pick up the pieces.

Pete looked at the shelf from 1909. It didn’t surprise him that Barbara had chosen the neighbouring row to stay close to him. Very soon, the Second Investigator was completely confused and didn’t know how many cobweb-covered files he had already inspected. His gaze wandered over dusty labels—RA1011—he was close. He ran his index finger over the neighbouring panel—WA151. No, that wasn’t right at all. Obviously someone had put it in the wrong place. The next attempt led him to files with the letter ‘S’. Oh, well... on to the next shelf.

Pete went back and saw Barbara in the neighbouring row, reading an old file. “Found anything?” he asked.

She did not react immediately, but then turned around and said: “Nah, this has nothing to do with our case.”

“Then put that back and keep looking!”

“It’s—”

Before she could continue, they heard Bob call out: “Come here! I found it!”

Pete hurried off while Barbara closed the file and put it back. Moments later, the whole group gathered around Bob. In his hand was a piece of paper.

“The file was empty except for this one sheet.”

“Do you think it is a clue?” Barbara asked.

“For sure! Just look at it... but I don’t know whether we should be pleased about this because, unlike the first clue, there’s no mention of the next step to the treasure.”

What they saw seemed amazingly familiar—an apparently completely senseless sequence of letters and numbers, similar to that from the palimpsest:

o o h v l a f h t i d o n e a d h c t e l q e
26 63 67 96 103 119 130 151 160 175 201

Pete sighed in exasperation.

“Mysterious,” Jupiter remarked, “but obviously exactly what we were looking for. The two messages are so similar that there can be no doubt about it.”

“There is this other thing,” Bob continued, “the date on the file is 115 years ago!”

“We’ll take this clue sheet, Bob,” Jupiter said. “Let’s go back and rack our brains over what it means.”

Moments later, they left the musty basement. The professor turned off the light and locked the door.

On the way up, he said: “I, for one, will leave the puzzle to you three... but keep me informed if you find out anything.”

“Of course, sir,” Jupiter said. “We’ll work on this right away.”

“Anyway, do you want me to take the three of you home?”

“We can walk from here to my uncle’s salvage yard. It’s not far. We’ll call you and Barbara as soon as we know more.”

Barbara opened her mouth as if she wanted to contradict, but closed it again without saying anything. Jupiter was glad about that—she was a client and he didn’t like her getting too involved in the investigation. The last thing they needed was for Barbara to follow them back to Headquarters.

“Pete still has to come with us,” Barbara quickly said. “His car is at our house.”

Pete nodded. “I’ll catch up with you, Jupe.”

When they came out of the staircase, they really noticed how cool it had been down there in the basement.

“I’d love to see Jennings’s stupid face when he shows up tomorrow and finds that empty file.” The First Investigator grinned in a good mood. “We left him behind at the start of this race. As I predicted, the score is one-nil to us!”

Bob offered to stow away the key back in its place while the professor and his daughter made their way out the back exit, which led to a walled car park for the City Hall staff. Jupiter followed right behind them, but as soon as he was out of the door, his high spirits fizzled out in an instant as two figures had just emerged from behind a tree.

Both held guns in their hands and pointed them at the professor and his daughter.

10. Alan Jennings is Back

“Alan Jennings...” Professor Mathewson called out. “We meet again!”

“Go back inside... now!” Jennings demanded, waving his gun. He was wearing a light-coloured, washed-out leather jacket and a light brown felt hat with a dark band. Standing beside him was Shulin, who had swapped her elegant dress for a white tank top and black track pants—all ready for action.

Just then, Pete appeared at the doorway. Bob was still inside the building, but had heard the commotion outside. Pete remained standing at the doorway as if rooted to the spot. In a split-second, Shulin ran up and pointed her gun at the Second Investigator, signalling to him to get back inside. Jennings then ushered the rest in. Barbara was pale with fright.

With some quick thinking, Jupiter positioned himself to allow the professor and Barbara to go in first. His idea was to go in after them and then quickly slam the door shut to lock out the two villains. Perhaps he would have succeeded, but Shulin was quicker. She slipped in before the First Investigator and now pointed her gun at Barbara.

Jennings entered last. With a loud clack, the door behind him fell into the lock. “Since we are certainly undisturbed on such a friendly Sunday afternoon in a public administration building, I’ll get straight to the point. I recognize you three rascals. You were in our hotel, in the restaurant, so I presume you stole the book.”

The nerve of this man! That was the last straw as Jupiter felt anger rising within him. “Correction, Mr Jennings—we took back the book you stole from Mr Mathewson!”

“The boy has guts,” Jennings noted. “At this moment, however, it’s a sign of stupidity, in my opinion.” He gave a broad grin. Sparse stubble covered his chin and cheeks. “We had planned to wait until tomorrow to make an official research visit here,”—he gave Jupiter a sharp look—“but when Shulin noticed that the parchment book was missing, we were afraid that someone else would go on a treasure hunt.”

“Quite rightly, as it turned out,” added Shulin.

The Three Investigators held their breath.

“Now, our business is very simple,” Jennings continued. “You give me whatever you’ve found in the file. Then we’ll wish each other a good time and never see each other again. You better not go to the police... or if you do anything stupid, we’ll come back... to whom, I do not know. Maybe the girl?”

Barbara trembled. She turned even paler, but quickly regained her composure and gave Jennings a defiant look.

“Listen—” Professor Mathewson began.

“Enough!” Jennings interjected. “Now, hand over what you’ve found, please.”

Jupiter thought feverishly. He had to gain time! Surely there must be some way to outsmart the two villains. Could they hand over something else? Lead them astray? Only with what? “What if we refuse?” he asked.

Jennings threw a quick glance at Shulin. She tensed her whole body, raised her left hand and swung it quickly and hard through the air. As she did so, she spun around on her own axis and let fly a ferocious kick to the back of a chair, sending it tumbling halfway across the

hall. Immediately afterwards, Shulin aimed her gun back at Barbara as if nothing had happened.

“It’s not like in the movies where people just grimace for a moment and that’s it,” Jennings said.

“If you know what you’re doing,” Shulin added, “it’s very easy to knock someone out with a single blow. I really don’t need a weapon that makes unnecessary noise.”

Pete broke out in a sweat as he remembered the 6th dan black belt he saw in the wardrobe.

“—But we don’t have to go to this extent, don’t you agree?” Shulin said and jumped towards Barbara, pulling her away from the others. Then she put her arm around Barbara’s throat from behind, while keeping her gun pointing at the girl.

“Stop it, Jennings!” cried Mathewson. “You leave my daughter alone!”

“I’ve already explained our little deal.” Jennings countered, “or do you want me to repeat it?”

“Never mind,” Mathewson relented. “Bob, you have the clue sheet. Just give it to them!”

Bob fumbled in his pocket for the piece of paper and handed it over to Jennings. The villain took a quick look at it and laughed. “Very good. For you, the treasure hunt is over... and remember—no police, or we will come back... and then things can get really nasty.”

Shulin pushed Barbara away, who staggered a few steps forward. Her father went to her and hugged her.

“Goodbye, my friends!” Jennings called out, and the very next moment, he and Shulin left the building through the back exit. Neither The Three Investigators nor the Mathewsons had any intention of pursuing them.

Relief spread. Mr Mathewson still held his daughter firmly in his arms.

Jupiter lowered his eyes. “A defeat across the board...” he hissed.

“The main thing is that nobody got hurt,” Mathewson said.

Barbara released herself from his embrace. “We could have given them some false clues!” Her lips pressed firmly together as she discreetly wiped a tear from her cheek, yet her eyes reflected unwavering determination. “We can’t just give up like this!”

“We won’t,” Bob said, “because not only do The Three Investigators investigate anything, but they also never give up!”

“—But not even our master investigator could have memorized the strange sequence of characters so quickly,” Pete interjected.

“That won’t be necessary.” Bob said and promptly pulled out his mobile phone. He tapped on it and held the phone up to the rest. “I have taken a photo of the clue sheet the moment I heard the commotion outside.”

Barbara whistled quietly.

The First Investigator laughed and slapped Bob on the shoulder. “Good work, Bob! This is far from over... and now we have to solve this strange message and get on to the second step of the treasure hunt! Let’s go!”

“Uh... hold on a minute,” Bob said. “Before we go, we better get that chair back here, or else we could get into trouble with Mr William Baker... right?”

11. Significant Progress

Jupiter stared at the printouts of the two photos that Bob took of the clues—one from the palimpsest and the other from the City Hall file. He had been at it for so long that the characters seemed to dance before his eyes.

Across the table, Pete had been writing and rearranging the letters in different ways. “*g-t-t-e-i-l*—” he muttered the beginning of the sequence to himself. “It doesn’t make sense even if I were to stand on my head. Neither does it make sense reading it backwards, nor if you only take every second or third letter...”

“Maybe the two sequences have to be considered together,” the First Investigator said with conviction, then fell back into brooding silence.

It was now just before four o’clock in the afternoon. Jupiter and Pete were sitting at Headquarters while Bob was out doing research at the Rocky Beach Public Library.

“Completely nonsensical, all this,” Pete eventually said.

“In both sequences, there are 23 letters,” Jupiter noted. “This cannot be a coincidence.”

“—And don’t get me into the numbers,” Pete said. “You know how much I dread them. If I hear more than two numbers in a sentence, my brain automatically shuts down.”

“Both sequences have 11 numbers each,” Jupe continued. “They are presented in ascending order, but you cannot add them or perform any other operations to determine a sequence...” The First Investigator faltered. He was convinced that the solution was right in front of him—only that he was unable to figure it out yet. There was probably a very simple system behind it—at least it would seem simple once the puzzle had been solved.

At that moment, they heard the Cold Gate open, and seconds later, Bob entered Headquarters.

“Bingo!” he called out. “I now know what we are actually looking for! The lead came from File RM311 which was created 115 years ago.”

“All right,” said Jupiter, “so let’s get down to business, Bob!”

“Take it easy! You must understand how I proceeded. I searched the digitized editions of the old city newspapers from back then. It was pretty tedious, by the way. Anyway, guess what happened around 115 years ago involving someone from Rocky Beach...”

“If we knew that, we wouldn’t need you,” said the Second Investigator.

“A jewellery robbery,” Bob said triumphantly. “It happened in San Francisco and was eventually traced to someone in Rocky Beach. It was an extremely spectacular theft, especially in terms of the value of the loot—a total of over fifty jewels, including eight perfectly cut diamonds as big as a fingernail! They are probably worth millions today!”

“Is this what we are looking for?” Pete asked. “The loot of a 115-year-old robbery?”

Bob looked at his notebook. “Looks like it... but this is by no means the end of the story. Listen! Back then, after months of investigations into the robbery, the police convicted a senior administrative officer of the Rocky Beach Town Hall—as it was then called. This suggests how the clue sheet had got into that file. However, the loot remained missing. The newspaper quoted the robber as saying: ‘You will never find it. The path to it is so well hidden that none of you is clever enough to find it.’”

“That’s a good way to put it,” Jupiter commented. “No one has found it for 115 years. It’s hard to imagine a better-hidden path.”

“So just who is this administrative officer?” Pete asked.

Bob gave a broad grin. “Oh yes, I haven’t told you his name. It will sound familiar.”

“Let me guess—Jennings,” Jupiter suspected.

“Exactly! A certain Jacob Jennings,” Bob stated. “From the dates of his activities, he could very well be Alan Jennings’s great-great-grandfather—that is, if they are even related at all.

“Anyway, from the reports, Jacob Jennings was very well-educated. In fact, his entire family belonged to the educated class, and they moved to Rocky Beach in the generation before him.

“There is still something to report about the robbery at that time. Jacob Jennings did not commit it alone. His accomplice was shot in the process, but both managed to escape and return to Rocky Beach.

“At first the police were unable to follow the trail, so the two thought they were safe. However after about four months, his accomplice died from the late effects of the gunshot wound. The injury was passed off as a hunting accident. This is probably what it says on the death certificate.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “Now just say that the accomplice was Shulin’s ancestor.”

Bob laughed. “Not that! His name was...” He flipped through his notebook. “—Ignacio Jaramago. At that time, he was from a respected family in Rocky Beach who had lived here for a long time. Jennings’s family, on the other hand, had moved here later.

“Meanwhile, the investigations continued, and months later, Jacob Jennings was arrested, found guilty and convicted. When interrogated, he named Jaramago as his accomplice.”

“—Which hardly did the accomplice any harm,” commented Pete. “He had died, so it was hardly possible to lock him up.”

“The newspapers were inundated with reports when everything came to light—after Jaramago’s death, as I said. He and Jennings were the talk of the town back then.”

“Wonderful work, Bob,” Jupe praised while pinching his lower lip. “We have made significant progress in this case. You know what? With this new information, many things seem to tie in. Let’s summarize what we know before we move to the next step. I’ve got a pretty good idea as to how this whole secret of the parchment book came about.”

“Let’s hear it then,” Pete urged.

“About 120 years ago,” Jupe began, “Arthur’s ancestor made the parchment book. As Professor Mathewson said, it was made as a curio item. So to make it look like something from the European Middle Ages, the creator got some poems from that ‘Letter Collection’—”

“—The ‘*Tegernsee* Letter Collection’,” Bob interjected.

“Yes... and he transcribed them onto the book to make it look like an antique item, and that’s all to it. Somehow the book got to Jacob Jennings, and he understood something about parchments.”

“Then came the robbery,” Bob took over. “I believe that he was unable to cash in on the jewellery as the police investigations were progressing, so he hid it somewhere. When the police closed in on him, he gave up on the loot. Before he was arrested, he wrote the clues into the parchment book and the RM311 file for an associate to recover the loot—probably someone from his immediate family or later generations.”

“Yes, yes...” Jupiter agreed. “Jacob Jennings was definitely knowledgeable about palimpsests, and knew how long it took for the ink components to seep through before he erased the original text.”

"I suppose this was to make it more difficult for others to get at," Bob said. "Back then, very few people knew that such a thing could be done, and even if they did, they might not know how to uncover the traces of the text. In this way, he has successfully fooled everyone—including the police."

"—But he believed his associates or beneficiaries could figure it out," Pete added thoughtfully. "He probably left them the book... but for some reason, it didn't work out the way he had imagined."

"I further suspect that he intended the clue to be revealed by UV light, rather than the ancient destructive methods," Jupe said.

"How come?" Pete asked.

"The timing of the events, Pete," Jupiter explained. "As the professor told us, the use of UV light was already understood then. However, no one else managed to get it done. I guess that Jacob Jennings never expected this issue to drag on for so long until the degradation of the ink and parchment set in, and UV light was no longer able to reveal the text. At some point, the book probably went missing, and we still don't understand how it happened."

"—And the loot was never found," Pete added.

"Then about fifteen years ago, Alan Jennings came into the picture when he was suspected to have broken into the parchment maker's shop," Bob continued, "but he could not find the book. Perhaps he was just looking for traces or a sales note in old records."

"Nevertheless, about ten years ago, the book resurfaced and came into the possession of Professor Mathewson," Jupe said. "By then, it was more than a century after the creation of Jacob Jennings's palimpsest, and modern methods were available to reveal the hidden text. Fast forward to today, Alan Jennings picks up on the trail."

"By the way, I wonder how Jennings found out that the book was with the professor?" Pete asked.

"I think I know," Bob replied. "I did an online check on the recent interview with Professor Mathewson. That book was brought up as an illustration that parchment books are still made today as curio items... and guess what? There is a photo of the professor holding this very book! So I believe Alan Jennings recognized it, and then decided to steal it."

"So it took over a century for the trace to become hot again," Pete sighed. "—And now not only are we after the loot, but also an arrogant gun-wielding researcher and a super fighter with feet of fury."

"As it is, our task is to recover the loot and bring this century-old mystery to a close," Jupiter said.

"Right on," Pete agreed. "Let's get started then."

"First, we have to decipher the clues to get to the second step," Jupe announced.

"Yes, I'm interested in what you two have done while I was away," Bob said.

"I'm clear that the messages were encoded in a way that scholars would be able to decipher them," Jupiter said. "In other words, some form of cryptography was used."

"So what progress have you made?" Bob asked.

"No real progress, Bob," Pete replied. "We're both at a loss. How about you take a closer look at these and give us some ideas?"

Silence prevailed for a few seconds while Bob helped himself to a bottle of water from their fridge. Then he casually glanced at Pete's scribbles of the characters, and then at the printouts of the two photos of the clues.

"Hmm..." Lost in thought, Bob stroked his finger over the two sequences of characters on the photos. "Without first considering the letters and numbers, I could see that the letters are separated by spaces... but so are the numbers. Why are they separated that way and—"

“The spaces!” Jupe suddenly exclaimed. “You might have something there, Bob!”

12. Cracking the Cipher

“What are the spaces about?” Pete asked.

Without replying, the First Investigator folded the second printout just above the letters. Then he placed it on top of the first printout and positioned the second set of letters just below the first. He looked at it for a moment before he tapped on the clues and grinned.

“You’re right, Bob! It’s a garden fence!”

“Garden fence?” Bob wondered aloud. “I didn’t say anything about a garden fence. What has that got to do with the clues?”

“It’s like the slats of a garden fence,” Jupiter explained. “In a standard garden fence, slats are arranged with spaces between them, allowing you to see through. Here, the letters are the slats, and there are spaces between them. The two sets of clues make no sense on their own. However, if you position them like what I have done here... look at this...” He pointed to the two printouts:

*g t t e i l o t e h r f u d r n c e k h p a u
o o h v l a f h t i d o n e a d h c t e l q e*

“You encode the message by placing the letters alternately on the two rows,” Jupe continued. “You start with the first character on the top row; followed by the first character on the second row; then the second character on the first row, and so on—moving between the two rows.” With his finger he pointed from one row to the other. Then he laughed. “It’s a classical type of transposition cipher. The garden fence cipher is easy to see through if you know both parts of the encrypted message, but if one part is missing, it is almost impossible to decipher it.”

“Okay, okay,” Bob interjected, “so what do the letters tell us then?” He took the printouts to read the message: “‘*go to the villa...*’ Geez, Jupe, it really works! This has to be the second step of the treasure hunt!”

“Let’s get the full message then,” Pete urged.

Bob read out the letters and Pete wrote them down. Very soon, the message was displayed in full:

gotothevillaofthethirdfounderandchecktheplaque

“‘*go to the villa of the third founder and check the plaque*’,” Pete read out.

“Oh wow!” Bob took a sip from his water bottle. “I bet that the next clue is on that plaque. Now we have to figure out how to get there—to the villa of this third founder. Who is this third founder? In the first place, the founder of what?”

“Don’t forget that we still have two rows of numbers to deal with,” Pete said. “Perhaps there is an inscription on the plaque, and these numbers are for getting the letters from it. This could reveal a new message.”

“You could be right, Pete,” Jupiter said. “So this villa is the second step of the treasure hunt, and the numbers and the plaque will give us the third... Fellas, today is a good day!” He

leaned back, satisfied.

“Let’s not forget that Jennings and Shulin may have already deciphered this message,” Bob said.

“—And that we have no idea who might be meant by the third founder,” Pete commented, “but puzzles are there to be solved!”

“Let’s get on with it!” Jupiter urged.

“Ideally, I should go back to the library to search in the archives but I guess I wouldn’t have enough time as it’s a bit late now,” Bob said. “I’ll try searching on the Internet.” He switched on the computer. “Before we get to the villa of the third founder, first things first, what founder are we talking about?”

“Jacob Jennings was employed in the local city administration, so the clue should refer to one of the founders of Rocky Beach,” Pete suggested.

“A good thought, Pete,” Jupiter said.

Pete’s suspicions seemed to be confirmed. When Bob keyed in the relevant keywords into the search engine, the results listed the names of the personalities who were considered to be the founders of their city... but which of them was the third?

“Let me read the article first,” Bob said. However in this case, it did not help. Then Bob discovered a paper by an amateur researcher that featured an image of the city’s foundation charter. Although the original document was in Spanish, an English translation was included. There, the first settlers of Rocky Beach were listed by name—and they were conveniently numbered!

“Bingo!” Bob said with satisfaction. “A historical document that puts the city’s founders in order from one to five. You really can’t ask for more than such a list. At that time, the area was mainly settled by the Spanish. The third is a certain José Luengo Campillo. This is easier than I thought.”

“Well, it’s easy because we have the Internet at our disposal,” Pete remarked. “If Jacob Jennings had been aware of this, I bet he would have made the task more difficult.”

“Now we just have to find out where the villa is. Jacob Jennings obviously knew it. It must be in the old city centre.”

It was not long before Bob found the address of Campillo House, as it was called, in the historical treatise on the city’s history. It was not far from City Hall, on the edge of the villa district.

The Three Investigators immediately set off in Pete’s car. It was now just after six o’clock. Although the sun was slowly sinking towards the horizon, it was still burning hot and was turning the inside of Pete’s car into an oven. The three of them longed for the air conditioning of Professor Mathewson’s Chevrolet Impala.

When they reached their destination, Pete parked his car and looked around suspiciously.

“What’s wrong?” Bob asked.

“Jennings and Shulin have both the messages. They could show up here at any moment and I don’t feel the slightest desire to see them again!”

“—Or they were already here,” said Jupiter. “In any case, we must not be intimidated.”

It was so clear and calm that a ship’s horn could be heard coming from the marina. The Three Investigators walked along the row of villas, looking for the desired house number.

Shortly, they found themselves at a waist-high stone wall, gazing at the spot where they had expected to see the villa. Before them stood a double-storey house with a sleek rendered façade, expansive floor-to-ceiling windows with roller blinds, a stylish sectional garage door, and solar panels mounted on the low-pitched metal roof.

“Er... what is this?” Pete wondered aloud. “This doesn’t look anything like a villa from the 18th century, does it?”

“The house number is correct,” Bob stated.

“Maybe the houses here have been renumbered,” Pete surmised. “After all, the document about the founders is old. A lot could have happened since then.”

Bob shook his head. “The work of the amateur researcher was only five years old. I’m sure he would have mentioned any changes.”

“Then maybe he didn’t check it and just copied it from some old records. Besides, we didn’t exactly read the paper carefully. We went straight for the address.”

“There’s one way to find out.” Jupiter pressed the bell button, which was located next to a gate in the wall.

A buzzing sound was heard. The Three Investigators exchanged brief glances, pushed the gate open and marched along the path that ran straight through the front garden.

Even before they reached the front door, it was opened. A blonde woman appeared in the doorway and looked at them in surprise. “Oh, I thought it was my son and his friends. Anyway, who are you looking for? I don’t want to subscribe to anything.” The woman eyed them suspiciously.

“We will not disturb you for long,” Bob assured. “Just one question, please. We are looking for the villa of José Luengo Campillo.”

“You mean Campillo House?” The woman shook her head. “Sorry, boys, you’re thirty years too late. There was an earthquake then and that villa completely collapsed.”

Pete moaned, unnerved. Could something go smoothly in this tricky case?

“Are there at least any remains?” Bob asked. “Maybe old plaques or signboards?”

The woman thought for a moment. “I don’t know anything about that. We bought the land after it had been unused for twenty years. It was a natural flowering meadow. If there was anything here, the excavators should have got rid of it during the clearing process.”

Disappointed, The Three Investigators thanked the lady and left the property.

“Now what?” Pete asked.

Jupiter turned around to the property one last time. “Looks like the trail ends here. It is absolutely impossible to find a plaque or inscription that was carted off to some dump after an earthquake thirty years ago. Even The Three Investigators have to throw in the towel.”

Bob suddenly stopped as if rooted to the spot. “—Not if Bob comes up with a great idea, yet again!”

“Huh? What have you got?” Jupiter asked.

“I’ll tell you where we should go now!”

13. The Third Founder

“It’s still open,” Bob noted. “I knew it!”

Jupiter looked at the sign next to the door. “We still have a good hour left until closing time at 7:30 pm. We’re lucky they’re open so late on Sundays.”

The building towered three storeys high and the wall shimmered in a pale shade of yellow. A local artist had left a huge painting on it—a city view of Rocky Beach. Above the main entrance, written in huge letters, were the words: ‘Rocky Beach Museum of Local History’.

Bob’s idea was as simple as it was brilliant. If a historically significant building like the villa of the city’s third founder had collapsed thirty years ago, the council should have, at the very least, collected old photos of it for the records. Moreover, if significant parts of the building—like a plaque—had been recovered, they could very well be exhibited in the local history museum.

There were only a few visitors wandering around the museum at this hour. As they entered the first showroom, Pete’s mobile phone rang and he casually answered it.

“Barbara here. I’m tired of sitting around at home twiddling my thumbs while you guys are out having adventures. Have you solved the puzzle?”

“We’re in the middle of something,” he said. “That’s why we’re here at the local museum.”

“The Museum of Local History? Why?”

“This is not easy to explain. Listen, Barbara, I don’t have much time because—”

She cut him off. “No problem! I’ll be with you in a moment, and then I can help you. It’s not far from my place.”

“Wait, the museum’s closing anyway, and—”

“I’ll hurry!”

The next moment, all he could hear was a beep on the line. Frustrated, he let his mobile phone disappear into his trouser pocket.

Jupiter and Bob were no longer to be seen. Pete found them in the next room.

“What is it?” Bob asked when he saw Pete’s unenthusiastic expression.

“Barbara will be here soon.”

“Why?” Jupiter asked.

“Don’t ask. She took me by surprise. She’s pretty good at that.”

“Hopefully we can get everything done before she shows up,” Jupiter said. He pointed to a small layout plan of the museum which hung on the wall next to a door. “On the second storey there is a permanent exhibition on the founding of Rocky Beach. That sounds good. If the city officials weren’t asleep back then, we’ll find what we’re looking for there.”

They hurried upstairs to the exhibit. There was only one elderly couple at the centre of the room, standing in front of a display case exhibiting old letters.

The three of them promptly split up to search the room. Shortly afterwards, Bob called out excitedly to his friends: “Fellas, over here!”

The Three Investigators crowded around at the Campillo House exhibit. In front of them was a series of excellent photographs... and most importantly, a metal plaque which—

according to the accompanying description—José Luengo Campillo had personally made and fixed in front of his villa.

The inscription on the plaque was in Spanish. Despite some signs of weathering and a broken corner, the text was clear enough:

*En la costa donde el mar susurra;
Nació el pueblo de Playa Rocosa.
Con lágrimas y fuerza en la mano;
Sueño común, en tierra concebido.*

*Desde la gran tierra hasta la cumbre;
Que todos vivan en paz para siempre.
En cada corazón, en cada jardín;
Que Playa Rocosa florezca sin fin.*

“This has to be the text to which the message refers,” said Jupiter enthusiastically. On the right of the plaque was the English translation:

*On the coast where the sea whispers;
The town of Rocky Beach was born.
With tears and strength in hand;
A shared dream, conceived on this land.*

*From the great land to the summit;
May everyone live in peace forever.
In every heart, in every garden;
May Rocky Beach flourish without end.*

Immediately Bob took out his mobile phone and took several photos of the plaque and the translated text.

“Shall we get to work here or shall we do it elsewhere?” Pete asked.

Jupiter looked at his watch and said: “We still have some time before the museum closes so we might just do the work here. Who knows we might have to check out other exhibits from the villa? ... I have the numbers here... I’ll read them. Pete, you count and read out the letters; and Bob, you write them down.”

“Right on, Your Excellency,” Pete said.

Bob pulled out a piece of paper to commence writing.

Just then, Barbara rushed into the room. The lemon-yellow dress had given way to faded denim overalls. The bright red T-shirt she had on was exactly the same colour as the socks that were practically glowing from her sandals. Pete looked at her and sure enough, the inevitable pouch was in play—as always.

“What are you doing?” asked Barbara.

“Later we’ll explain everything to you,” Pete said. “There is no time to lose. Read the numbers, Juve.”

“Okay... I read from both clues, the numbers two at a time in their ascending order,” Juve said. “Later if we need to split them back into the two number sequences for whatever reason, we can still do so. Here goes... 17, 26...”

Barbara squeezed herself in between. “What are you doing?” she repeated.

“Later,” Bob grumbled. “Pete, please proceed.”

Pete slid his finger over the inscription and read out: “17–*m*... 26–*a*...”

Bob soon had an interim result that he didn’t like at all: ““*maasueaacis*’,” he read, “and that is only half of it. Doesn’t sound very sensible.”

“We’ll continue until the end and then see what we have,” Juve decided... and so it went until all the numbers were read.

“Finally, what do we have, Bob?” Pete asked.

“Look at this...” Bob showed them what he jotted. “They are meaningless! Something must be wrong here... I can’t read it out as I don’t want to twist my tongue. Even if you try to group the letters into a pronounceable bunch of characters, it still doesn’t help.”

True enough. What he had written on the slip of paper made no sense at all:

maasueaaciseacuprenzio

““*ma asuea acise acu prenzio*’,” Pete read. “Could it be Latin or Italian?”

“Are you sure you haven’t miscounted?” asked Barbara, who apparently understood what The Three Investigators were doing.

“Absolutely,” Pete replied. “I have been very careful.”

“What if we separate the letters back to tie in with the two original number sequences?” Jupiter suggested. “Let’s give it a try.”

What they got was even more ridiculous:

*m a u a c s a u r n i
a s e a i e c p e z o*

It quickly became clear that this was not going to help. Barbara took the paper and looked at it. “Maybe you miscounted and—”

“I didn’t,” Pete insisted.

Jupiter turned his attention to the text on the plaque and looked closer. Suddenly, he exclaimed: “Hold on! ... Pete, did you include the punctuation marks in your count?”

“No, I only counted the letters,” Pete replied. “Why?”

“That could be it!” Jupiter exclaimed. “I think you need to include the punctuation marks as characters in your count!”

“Why?”

“Strictly speaking, I don’t know,” Jupiter admitted. “Perhaps it’s like how you use a typewriter to create text. You need to press a key to type the punctuation mark, so you count it as a character.”

“What about spaces then?” Pete asked.

“You don’t count spaces,” Juve said.

“Sheesh...” Pete hissed. “You also need to press a key to create a space.”

“Look,” Juve said, “it could all come down to what Jacob Jennings considered as characters to be counted. Just do the count one more time and see what we get.”

“Okay,” Pete agreed. “We don’t have much time left, so let’s get going.”

Bob took out his pen, and another piece of paper, and commenced writing.

With zeal, The Three Investigators started a new attempt. As before, Jupiter called out the numbers; Pete counted and read the corresponding letters; and Bob wrote them down... but this time, he looked more and more satisfied from moment to moment. Very soon, it was completed.

“You were right, Jupe!” Bob said triumphantly. “What we now have makes a lot of sense...” He held up the paper for the rest to see:

maymyfriendrestinpeace

“‘*may my friend rest in peace*,’” Jupiter read out softly. “That’s it!”

“—A clear, simple message,” Bob commented. “We cracked the code, fellas!”

A loudspeaker mounted on the ceiling crackled, then a voice blared across the room: “We would like to remind you that the museum is now closing. Please complete your tour in the next few minutes.” There was another crackle, then silence returned.

“‘May my friend rest in peace’,” Jupiter repeated. “It is perfectly clear what that means!”

“Quiet, Jupe,” Pete warned. “We are not alone.” Although the elderly couple still seemed to be intensively occupied at the display case, there was no need to broadcast their discovery to the whole world.

The Three Investigators and Barbara came closer together so that they could continue speaking in a more subdued manner.

“This clue is the third and final step of the treasure hunt,” Pete said. “Clearly, the treasure is—” He faltered when he suddenly realized what their next destination was. “The loot is in the accomplice’s grave!”

“Exactly,” Bob agreed.

“—But it does not say which cemetery,” Pete added.

“Where would you think it would be? San Francisco?” Jupe quipped. “At the time, he comes from a respected family here in Rocky Beach. It makes sense that we first look for his grave right here!”

“Isn’t that crazy?” Pete wondered aloud. “First the accomplice dies... what’s his name? ‘Hisamigo’?”

“Jaramago,” Bob corrected.

Pete grinned. “That’s what I said—his *amigo*... Well, first his *amigo* dies, then Jacob Jennings hides the loot in his grave.”

Barbara hadn’t really got the full picture, but she understood what Pete had just said.

Suddenly, she sensed movement behind her and instinctively turned around. Startled by what she saw, she accidentally bumped into a fire extinguisher mounted on the wall. “Uh... quiet, guys...” she whispered. “We have company.”

The Three Investigators turned around in unison.

14. Barbara Saves the Day

As before, Alan Jennings wore his leather jacket and felt hat. Beside him was his sidekick, Shulin, who gave the four of them a cold look.

Fortunately they were not alone in the room. The elderly couple was still there at the display case. In front of witnesses, the two villains would be forced to hold back from committing violent acts.

“We meet again, you rascals,” Jennings said. “It’s unfortunate because I would have wished not to see you all again.”

“Likewise,” Bob said loud enough for Jennings to hear.

“I should have let Shulin knock... or should I say ‘kick’ some sense into you,” Jennings added.

Thoughts raced through Jupiter’s head. How could they prevent the two villains from reading the inscription on the plaque? Of course, the museum would close in a few minutes, but they would only need a few seconds to take a photo of it. If The Three Investigators didn’t come up with something in a flash, their opponents would solve the puzzle, and they would meet again at Jaramago’s grave.

“What have you found out?” Shulin demanded.

“We couldn’t get anything,” Bob lied. “The numbers we have must be wrong.” He was glad his voice wasn’t shaking—at least not more than was appropriate for the situation.

“You’re lying,” Shulin said, completely convinced. “One thing I’m sure of—you rascals are smart. So out with the truth now!”

“We have already said that our numbers are wrong,” Jupiter said. “We couldn’t figure it out, so what more do you want from us?”

“Hand over what you’ve got,” Jennings demanded.

The Three Investigators stood there rooted to the spot. Darn! They had done all the hard work and right now, they have to surrender it to the rogue researcher.

Jupiter quickly took a look around the room. There were two doors. They had entered earlier through the front door, as Jennings and Shulin had just done. However now, they were at the Campillo House exhibit, which was nearer to the back door. Should they just flee through this back door?

Before Jupiter could attempt anything, it was Barbara who spoke up: “Mr Jennings... I asked these three boys to get the parchment book back for my father, and they did. That’s all I cared for, and now, there is no need for us to continue with this wild goose chase. If I give you what we have, do you promise to leave us alone?”

“Why sure,” Jennings said. “I have said that before, and I’ll say it again—give us what you have and you’ll never see us again. So, hand it over now...”

“Okay... here you go!” Barbara stepped forward and handed him the piece of paper she was holding.

The rogue researcher tore it out of her hand and looked at it for a couple of seconds. “What nonsense is this? What does this mean?”

Just then, the loudspeaker crackled again and the announcement was made that all visitors should leave the museum. Jupiter was thinking feverishly about how he could take

advantage of the situation. The two villains should not be allowed to read the text on the plaque!

Before Jupe found a solution to the dilemma, Barbara took action. Drowned out by the announcement, she suddenly turned to Pete, who was closest to her, and whispered in his ear: "I'll distract them. Get out while you still can!"

A split-second later, Barbara ripped the fire extinguisher from the wall, rushed past the two villains, and headed towards the centre of the room where the elderly couple were. Jennings and Shulin turned around just in time to see Barbara raise the fire extinguisher high above her head and smash it onto the display case!

There was a loud crash, and shards of glass flew in all directions. The couple jumped to the side in shock.

Immediately, an alarm went off—shrill and loud!

Jennings and Shulin just stood there thunderstruck, staring at Barbara.

Unseen by others, Pete pulled his two equally stunned friends out the back door. With a mutual, silent understanding, Jupe and Bob rushed off to look for an alternative way out of the building so as to avoid being detained for questioning. Meanwhile, Pete stayed out of sight just outside the door to listen and catch glimpses of the unfolding pandemonium.

Two security guards stormed into the room, looking as if they couldn't believe what had just happened. They had probably never experienced anything that exciting in their job before.

Seconds later, the alarm was switched off.

"Nobody move," cried one of the guards. "Who did this?"

"Me!" Barbara raised her hands above her head.

The couple nodded to the guards in confirmation.

"These two forced me to do it," Barbara pointed to Jennings and Shulin.

"Nonsense!" Jennings blurted out in shock.

"You two and the girl stay here and don't move," one of the guards ordered, pointing to the two villains.

"Hey, we don't even know this girl," Shulin burst out. "In fact, she is with these three boys—" She turned around and pointed to the Campillo exhibit... only that no one was there! "Where... where are they?"

"Be quiet!" the guard ordered. "You are under suspicion of a crime. We'll sort it all out."

"You've got it all wrong—" Jennings argued.

"Quiet!" the guard repeated.

Meanwhile, Pete had overheard everything. He discreetly glanced inside the room. Jennings and Shulin were still standing motionless, their backs turned to him, as the guards engaged in a discussion, appearing uncertain about their next steps. The elderly couple visibly grappled with maintaining their composure, while Barbara just stood there with her shoulders slumped. Her brown, fuzzy hair hung down sadly, her gaze fixed on the floor... but a satisfied grin lay on her face.

Moments later, Bob came back to get Pete. They ran to a fire escape where Jupiter was waiting, and the three of them scrambled down. Outside, they ran on, kept looking back, but didn't see anyone. They literally threw themselves into Pete's car.

So The Three Investigators were able to make their escape. Barbara's spontaneous action had quickly and unconventionally solved the problem that Jupiter had racked his brains over in vain. Such a radical method had simply not occurred to him. Now, even if Jennings and Shulin were found to be innocent, they would hardly be allowed the opportunity to examine the plaque.

Of course, Barbara was in deep trouble, but that could be solved. The first thing to do was to take advantage of the opportunity she had given the investigators.

Pete immediately sped off with squealing tyres, and this time none of his friends complained about his reckless driving.

15. The Jaramago Mausoleum

The drive went across Rocky Beach to the cemetery.

“Barbara is always good for a surprise!” Pete said. “The way she got Jennings and Shulin off our backs, that was—” He faltered because he could not find the right word.

“Cool?” Bob suggested.

“Yeah!” Pete agreed. “Ha! She also gave them the wrong piece of paper—the one with the nonsensical ‘Latin’ message.”

“Barbara’s been on a rampage,” Bob added. “Thanks to her bold move, we have a clear path to the cemetery because Jennings won’t get the plaque inscription until tomorrow at the earliest.”

“I’m sure he’ll have no qualms about breaking in there tonight,” Pete countered.

“—But not as long as they’re cleaning up.” Jupiter could not help laughing. “The police will be there to make sure that everything is okay. Barbara will also be all right after we explain to Inspector Cotta what we were doing. Anyway, this buys us a bit of time.”

“Hopefully plenty of time,” Pete said. “It is now up to us to solve the mystery... but there is something that I do not like—running around in a cemetery in the dark.”

“Given our luck in this case, I wouldn’t be surprised if the grave no longer existed.” Bob remarked.

“I don’t think you could just clear away a grave like that,” Pete said.

Jupiter cleared his throat. “I have to disagree with you. You don’t buy your burial place permanently, but only for a certain period of time. If there are no descendants who—”

“I don’t want to hear that,” Pete interrupted. “Anyway, I don’t like the fact that this has to end up in the cemetery of all places. That chap was buried there over a century ago, so his grave would be in the historical section where hardly anybody goes anymore. I’m sure everything there is completely overgrown and... well, that makes it even creepier. A hundred and fifteen years is a long time.”

Bob laughed. “You said that beautifully.”

Pete steered the car off the road and into the cemetery car park. As expected, there was no other car there. During the summer months, it closed at eight o’clock—which was right around now. It was already quite gloomy, and in less than half an hour, it would be completely dark.

“We need our flashlights,” Jupiter said. “Who knows how long it will take us to find the grave?”

“—And then what?” Pete asked. “Are you expecting to find a bag of jewellery placed next to the grave which, by pure chance, nobody has discovered for 115 years?”

“I don’t know what to expect,” the First Investigator admitted. “Let’s just take a look.”

“In case you have any funny ideas, we can’t just dig the grave and open the coffin!” Pete continued. The mere thought of it sent shivers down his spine. “After all, we are not grave robbers.”

“We’ll just look around first,” Jupiter said vaguely. “Once we have found the grave, we might discover something... then we can inform Inspector Cotta.”

The Three Investigators went off. The wrought-iron gate to the cemetery was unlocked. It squeaked pitifully on its hinges. Startled by the noise, several birds fluttered away.

"Pete has already mentioned it," said Jupiter. "Since the grave is more than a century old, we have to search the historic section of the cemetery."

"There the gravestones must have weathered," Bob interjected. "Let's hope that the inscription has remained legible."

"The Jaramagos were a distinguished family here at the time," recalled Jupiter. "We can assume that the grave is not the smallest in a secluded location."

They scurried along the gravel-scattered paths, past many gravestones, and eventually reached the historical section, which was hidden behind a dense group of trees. There, the paths were narrower and the graves more dilapidated. The trees closed above them, forming an almost continuous canopy, making it almost completely dark. Branches and dried leaves hung on weathered figures.

While Jupiter tried to read the inscriptions on the gravestones, Pete looked around uneasily. He could not prevent a shiver from running down his spine.

"Let's search faster," Bob said. "It's best if we split up."

"Split up?" Pete's voice sounded shriller than he intended.

"It's the best way to find what we're looking for," Jupiter agreed with Bob. "I'll take this path." Without further discussion, he marched to the right.

Bob turned to the left, leaving Pete no choice but to go straight ahead. "Let's hope we find something real soon," he murmured.

A gust of wind made an almost bare bush rustle. Roots were sticking out of the ground. Some of the graves were so neglected that they could hardly be recognized as such. Perhaps it was also because of the gloomy twilight that they almost blended in with their surroundings.

Pete tried his best to read the inscriptions in the light from his flashlight. He could hardly decipher some of them, because they were covered with moss or too weathered.

"Come here!" Bob's voice suddenly rang through the silence. "Hurry!"

It took Pete a moment to move around in the darkness. Then he spotted the light from Bob's flashlight dancing between the tombs, tearing a towering structure out of the darkness.

It was a mausoleum!

"It was so obvious that I completely overlooked it," cried Bob. "This robber obviously belonged to a really important family. This is their mausoleum. Noble, if you ask me. It's surprising that someone like him would become a robber."

"Perhaps only his ancestors were rich, whereas he ran out of money," Jupiter suspected.

A stone path led to the building, which was twice as tall as a man and certainly eight or ten metres wide. Ivy overran the walls of weathered sandstone, and a dead tree stretched bare branches into the sky.

Several statues were enthroned on the flat roof. One was an angel with extended wings, and another was a figure that held out a spear with a broken tip.

A plaque on the front wall listed the names of those interred in the mausoleum. There were well over a dozen members of the family. The first name was Miguel Jaramago, who died in 1825, and others followed in close succession—probably his wife and immediate family. The list extended to Ignacio Jaramago—the one they were looking for.

"The list ends with him," Pete noted. "Perhaps those after his generation became impoverished."

"—Or that the scandal caused by his shameful actions ruined their reputation to the point that they finally left Rocky Beach," Jupe surmised.

Pete was about to take a closer look at the noble structure when he heard something above him, and he flinched.

“What is it?” Bob asked.

Pete took a step back and tried to direct the beam of his flashlight to the roof, but he stumbled and landed unceremoniously on his backside. The beam of light twitched over the wall, grazed the statues and got lost over them. Probably startled by this, a bird spread its wings on the roof of the structure and fluttered into the air, croaking.

“It’s yet another bird!” Pete gasped.

Unperturbed by the small commotion, Jupiter proceeded to inspect the entrance to the mausoleum, where there was a huge and heavy wooden door with a lever mechanism. At the bottom edge was a steel metal track as the pathway for the door to slide open or close.

Jupe realized that this was a ‘lift-and-slide door system’—something he was familiar with as he had helped his uncle repair one at the salvage yard. “Look at this, fellas! When you push down this lever, the door panel is slightly raised off its seated position and the bottom-mounted rollers are engaged. This allows the door to glide along its track.”

“Jupe, don’t open it!” Pete called out after getting back on his feet.

“I can’t at the moment,” Jupiter replied. “Can’t you see this huge padlock here?”

“Too bad!” Pete said. “I’m not picking the lock for you. Can you see how corroded this thing is? Look!”—he held up the padlock—“The keyhole is clogged with debris—meaning I can’t do anything about it. I’m sure the internal mechanism is no longer functioning. You probably need a heavy-duty bolt cutter to break it.”

“So, do you have one in your car?”

“Of course not! Jupe, you’re so keen on breaking in here, but wouldn’t that be amounting to desecration?”

Jupiter faltered. “It probably would be,” he admitted, “but that’s not what I’m concerned about right now. Put yourself in the shoes of Jacob Jennings. In a cloak-and-dagger operation, he came here 115 years ago, went inside, and hid the loot in his friend’s coffin. Who would look here?”

“Pretty brilliant idea,” Bob commented, “but honestly, I don’t even want to imagine what it looks like in there! I mean, that Miguel Jaramago has been lying here for almost 200 years! Could anything be left of his coffin? What about the other dead people and our robber?”

“It doesn’t matter!” Pete burst out. “We have to get out of here before Jennings and Shulin show up! I wouldn’t put anything past them. Besides... breaking into a hotel suite was one thing, but desecrating a tomb? I’m out. We’ll just call Inspector Cotta and let him handle it.”

“Hold on, hold on...” Jupiter said. “Without concrete evidence, the inspector’s hands are tied. It will not be easy to obtain an official permit to enter the mausoleum. It’s not as simple as calling a city counsellor to let us into City Hall on a Sunday.”

“So what do you suggest?” Bob asked.

“Let’s look around the area. Maybe we can find some clues.” Jupiter made his way through the overgrown weeds near the structure. It was highly unlikely that the loot had been lying undiscovered somewhere near the mausoleum rather than inside it.

A ghostly whistle made him flinch. There was something right above him! The First Investigator directed his flashlight upwards. As he looked up at the wall of the mausoleum, he discovered a small window, or rather an opening of about the width of a hand. It was probably to let light into the interior and to provide ventilation. Once again, there was a whistling sound when a sudden gust of wind blew through. Apparently there was a similar opening on the opposite side.

He called his friends. “Give me a leg-up to look into the opening up there,” Jupiter asked and in the next second, he stepped onto the clasped hands of his friends. Supported in this way, he pulled himself up to the opening, and shone his light into the interior of the mausoleum.

The beam of light fell into a brick niche. In it stood a statue of Madonna with raised hands. A gold plating on the stone garments flashed as the light fell on it. Dust danced in the beam of light.

Jupiter shone his light all around the interior chamber. With some difficulties, he saw several other holy figures in niches in the side walls. In the middle of the chamber was a small altar, and beside it was a staircase leading down into the depths. The First Investigator whistled softly.

“What’s in there?” Bob asked.

“Apparently, the part above ground is a chamber that serves as a kind of chapel. The dead are probably buried underground in a vault or—”

“Hold on, Juve!” Bob moaned. “Before you give one of your elaborate descriptions, please come down. You’re not the lightest investigator around!”

When Jupiter stood back on the ground again, he continued unperturbed: “As I said, the dead are probably in an underground vault or a crypt.”

“A crypt?” Pete repeated uneasily.

“Yes, a crypt is a vault that is used as a burial place. Its primary purpose is to provide a secure and dignified final resting place for human remains, offering an alternative to traditional ground burial or cremation—”

“Yeah, yeah...” Pete interjected. “I know what a crypt is. Can we go home now?”

The wind picked up. A dried branch scraped over the stone path in front of the building. There was a rustling in the crowns of the surrounding trees.

“Weren’t you listening, Pete?” Jupiter asked. “Cotta cannot gain entry here so easily. You know how it is with red tape. It may take days before the police can enter the mausoleum... and somehow Jennings will appear here soon. Barbara’s trick has only delayed him—till tomorrow at the latest! We have to get in there now!”

“We can’t just go in like that!” Pete argued.

“Oh yes, we can,” a voice rang out... followed by the click of a gun.

16. Locked In

“Don’t move,” Shulin said and stepped onto the stone path at Jennings’s side. She pointed her gun at The Three Investigators.

“You’re going to listen to me very carefully now,” Jennings said. “Your little friend thought she was super smart, but while she’s sitting around the police whining and crying, we’re already here and we’re going to finish this business!”

“How did you—” Bob began.

“If you must know... the security guards finally realized that the brat was lying. While they were questioning the two elderly witnesses, I just walked over to the plaque and took a photo of it. Now I’m not going to let you get in my way anymore!” He grinned. “You will now open the door of this building.”

Jupiter knew that once they were inside the cramped chamber, their chances of escape would be slim. There was no time for him to think long and hard.

“Ramble and scramble!” Jupe shouted. Spontaneously, the three of them rushed off in different directions.

Pete was nearest to Shulin, and when she tried to stop him, he raised his flashlight and pointed it right in her face to temporarily blind her. However, that did not affect the woman for long. As Pete ran past her, she let out a fiery kick which landed at the back of Pete’s knees. The Second Investigator lost his footing and stumbled forward. He just managed to stretch out his arms and break his fall so that he did not hit the ground face first.

In a flash, Shulin went after Bob. She caught up with him and unleashed a roundhouse kick onto Bob’s side. That catapulted him sideways. He yelled out and landed on the ground just like Pete.

As the slowest of the three, Jupiter had not yet taken five steps when Jennings pushed him. The First Investigator cried out as he tripped over a gravestone and landed with his face in the weeds. His flashlight soared through the air, hit another gravestone and broke. Jupiter groaned and was dragged back by Jennings.

Even before Bob was back on his feet, Shulin clasped his neck with her forearm and pulled him along. His feet dragged across the stone path as he struggled helplessly in her grip.

Meanwhile, Pete regained his composure and saw that Jennings and Shulin were occupied with his friends. For a split-second, he realized that he had a chance of escaping to get help... but he brushed that idea aside. He could not just leave his friends here with the two armed villains. It was three against two, even though one of their opponents was a martial arts exponent. Perhaps there was a way to outsmart them.

“You guys want to play?” Shulin asked, not even out of breath. “You’ve picked the wrong person. When I was your age, I already had my third black belt.”

“Up you go!” Jennings demanded. No sooner was Jupe standing than Jennings pushed him towards the entrance to the mausoleum.

Shulin drew her gun again. “One more attempt like that and you’ll be sorry. I hope you realize how convenient it is that we are in a cemetery here.”

“Open the door,” Jennings commanded.

“I can’t,” Jupiter replied. “It’s locked.”

Alan Jennings walked over and saw the corroded padlock. He then raised his gun and fired a shot at it and it promptly dropped off. "A simple solution for a simple problem," he remarked. "Now get on with it!"

Reluctantly, Jupe and Bob went up to the door. The flashlight trembled in Bob's hands as he directed the beam at the lever mechanism. He stood slightly bent, his side aching terribly where Shulin had kicked him.

Jupiter grabbed the lever and tried to push it down with all his might. Nothing happened. "This has not been moved for a very long time. Maybe the mechanism doesn't work anymore. The downward pressure of the door's weight creates a compression seal that—"

"Shut up!" Jennings yelled at the top of his voice, as his patience wore thin. "You!" He turned to Pete. "Go help him!"

Now the two of them pushed down the lever while Bob held the flashlight. There was a creaking and cracking noise as the door was slightly lifted. Presumably, the rollers were engaged, because all of a sudden, despite the grinding and scraping noises, they were able to slide the door along the track!

A dark opening yawned in the sandstone wall of the building. Musty air hit them.

"Pee-ew!" Pete exhaled deeply. He felt a huge lump in his throat when he imagined why it smelled so bad.

"Get in!" Shulin ordered.

Jennings grabbed Pete and pushed him into the dark. The Second Investigator stumbled into the chamber and directed the beam of his flashlight inside. Jupiter was next.

"Give me your flashlight," Jennings told Bob, snatching it from his hand.

Shortly afterwards, they were all crowded inside the chamber. The interior was charged with an eerie tension, as if the air itself held its breath in anticipation.

As Jennings directed the flashlight around, Jupiter discreetly followed the beam, casting a cautious glance throughout the chamber. Next to him, old stone steps led down into the depths.

Along one wall, a small coffin was nestled in a shadowy niche. This had escaped his earlier scrutiny from outside, as it was hidden in a blind spot. Notably, this was the sole coffin situated at the ground level of the building. In front of it stood a glass showcase displaying a doll with shaggy blonde hair and worn clothing. Jupiter realized what it was for, as he had heard of this custom—the doll was the favourite toy of the child in the coffin.

Jennings paid no attention to this macabre discovery. "The other coffins must be down there," he said coldly. "You with the flashlight, go first!"

"Me?" Pete gasped.

"Go on!" Jennings snorted impatiently.

Pete went downstairs. Ten uneven steps with no handrail led into a crypt. The walls were built from rough stones. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling. A fat spider scurried away, and a cockroach wriggled in its web. The two flashlight beams created more shadows than light.

The floor area of the crypt was much smaller than the chamber above ground. At the centre were eight coffins, each resting on two stone pedestals. In addition, there were several niches in the rock face where more coffins lay.

"Find Ignacio Jaramago's coffin!" Jennings's voice echoed eerily in the confined space.

The Three Investigators crowded next to the coffins. Pete tried not to touch any of them, but it was hardly possible. Jennings and Shulin remained at the bottom of the stairs.

Bob grimaced in disgust as he moved a little to the side and a cobweb stuck in his hair. He tried to wipe it away, but it got caught between his fingers.

Pete pointed his flashlight at one of the coffins. A name plate revealed the dead man to be 'Fernando Jaramago'.

He moved on to the next. The name plate had come loose and lay on the ground. Pete bent down to pick it up. As he did so, the light fell between the two pedestals supporting this coffin. Something moved, followed by a squeak... then a furry little body dropped onto Pete's foot and scurried away.

"Aaaargh!" he called out.

"Now what's wrong?" Jennings asked.

"A rat," the Second Investigator croaked in disgust.

Shulin laughed. "—At most a mouse. Come on, read the name plate."

He turned it around—'Ruben Jaramago' was written on it.

It was only at the sixth attempt that he found what he was looking for. So this was it, the final resting place of the man who, together with Jacob Jennings, had committed a spectacular jewellery robbery more than a century ago. Noticeably, it was just a plain wooden box, clearly deteriorated and far less ornate than the other coffins. This probably showed the family's fall from grace as a result of the criminal activities of this one member.

Jennings pointed his flashlight at the coffin. "Search around the coffin! We are watching you closely, so don't try to trick us."

Bob bent down and inspected the space between the two pedestals, but found nothing.

"There are not too many places to hide a bag of jewels here," Jupiter reported.

"So it has to be in his coffin," Jennings said impatiently.

The last bit of blood ran from Pete's face. "—But we can't just—"

"Of course you can! Go ahead, open the coffin!"

"—But—" Pete began to protest.

"All right, all right," Jupiter interrupted his friend. He looked for a starting point to lift the lid, but discovered something else. "It's nailed shut. There's nothing we can do."

Shulin handed her gun to Jennings in exchange for the flashlight, and then walked towards the coffin.

"Move!" She pushed Bob aside, who was still crouching halfway under the coffin. He fell against the pedestal, tried to balance himself, but bumped his head. A dull thud echoed off the walls.

From a standing position, Shulin lifted her leg, tensed herself and—to the shock of the boys—landed several lightning-like kicks to the side of the coffin. The wood, rotten over the decades, cracked, and pieces of it flew all over. A long metal angle came loose off the side. Shulin yanked it off and used it to forcefully pierce and pry at the lid repeatedly until it gave way. It was grave desecration at its worst.

However, before anyone could take a look inside the coffin, a grinding and scraping noise was heard above them—as if the building was about to collapse.

Alan Jennings cursed when he realized what the noise was. "The door is closing!"

Then a loud, thunderous noise erupted and lasted for a few seconds before everything fell silent.

Everyone stood frozen... when they realized that they were locked in the mausoleum!

17. A Brawl Breaks Out

For a second, nobody moved—then Pete acted! He wanted to take advantage of the momentary panic to catch Jennings off guard. He jumped up and kicked Jennings's gun. It flew against the wall and bounced off, landing on one of the coffins, sliding over the lid and falling to the ground.

Jennings took a swing at Pete, but the Second Investigator ducked in time. The rogue researcher immediately thrust his shoulder forward and hit Pete full on, causing him to stagger backwards. Then the Second Investigator held up his flashlight and shone it in Jennings's face—just as he did to Shulin earlier outside the mausoleum. Jennings retaliated by swinging helplessly and somehow knocked the flashlight off Pete. The flashlight flew against the wall, broke, and all the batteries fell out.

Now, the only light source left was the flashlight held by Shulin. As she was occupied watching the altercation between Jennings and Pete, Jupiter attacked her. However, she was very quick. Before Jupe could land a blow, she spun around and rammed her elbow into his stomach. The First Investigator groaned in pain, staggered towards the coffin, and dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Shulin knew that the gun that Pete had kicked away, landed somewhere between two coffins near her. She only needed to shine her flashlight around a bit to see it. As she bent down to get it, Bob intervened by kicking the weapon away. Almost immediately, he shoved Shulin. In the narrow crypt, there was no room to move. She staggered to the side, lost her footing, and fell against a coffin. In the process, the flashlight was flung out of her hand and dropped on the ground. The beam of light from it pointed to an obscure corner. This provided some light to the rest of the crypt, although it was very dim.

"Enough!" Jennings's voice thundered. "You rascals, don't move!" He held up Shulin's gun—and fired it against the ceiling. Dust trickled down.

Bob stood there rooted to the spot, and realized that there was no sign of Jupiter. He was probably still lying down somewhere. Apparently Shulin had hit him harder than it had initially appeared.

"Jupe! Where are you?" Bob called out.

There was no answer. Bob proceeded to go round the coffin to look for the First Investigator.

"Stop!" cried Jennings threateningly.

"My friend's lying somewhere. He may be badly hurt and—"

"I said don't move," Jennings repeated. "Shulin, find the jewels and go upstairs! Check why the door was closed and how to open it again."

Shulin stood up and stepped over the debris from the smashed coffin lid to get the flashlight. Not only that, but she also managed to retrieve Jennings's gun. Then she squeezed past Bob to Ignacio Jaramago's coffin, and shone a beam of light in it. There was total silence in the crypt as all the attention was on Shulin.

Bob also took a look inside the coffin and saw dark, decaying remains of fabric... a pale skeletonized arm and hand... along with phalanges that seemed to be reaching out for something to grasp...

Just as Shulin extended her hand into the coffin, an eerie and halting voice was heard, seemingly coming from the coffin!

“Aaa... aaaa... *¡Ve... te! ... ¡Dé... ja... me... en... paz!*”

“Aaaargh!” Shulin cried out. The light of the flashlight in her hand trembled restlessly.

“*¡Ve... te! ... ¡Dé... ja... me... en... pazzz!*”

For the second time, the voice echoed eerily in the crypt.

Pete involuntarily backed away until the wall stopped him. He then crouched down to regain his composure.

At the same moment, Jupiter jumped out seemingly from nowhere and lunged at Shulin. Nevertheless, the First Investigator’s macabre trick had frightened her for a moment, allowing him to knock the gun out of her hand.

On the stairs, Jennings cursed and aimed the gun into the narrow crypt. Perhaps he only hesitated to shoot in the dim light as he might hit his partner in all the confusion.

Then Pete decided to take action. He sprang up from his crouched position, grabbed Jennings’s legs, and dragged him down the stairs. Jennings tried to break his fall, but he hit the ground hard. Again, Pete managed to kick the gun out of Jennings’s hand.

At the same time, Shulin had regained her composure, but it was only temporary as Bob threw himself against her legs and dragged her to the ground. As she fell, her hand struck against a stone pedestal... and her flashlight broke.

The last source of light in the crypt went out, and total darkness covered everything.

However, even without light, the brawl continued. Bob felt a blow on his upper body, but he was powerless. Someone had swung helplessly in the dark, and Bob was on the receiving end.

Somewhere in the darkness, somebody groaned. Could that be Jupiter? But how should Bob assist the First Investigator? He could not even see his hand in front of his eyes. Carefully he turned to the side and pushed his foot against something hard—probably the stone pedestal of one of the coffins.

“We have to get out of here!” Shulin finally said. She sounded uneasy, almost panicky. Obviously the situation was getting to her.

On the other hand, Jennings was less sensitive. “You darn brats!” he shouted into the darkness.

The Three Investigators, however, remained silent. Bob felt his way through the darkness, until he bumped into someone—and he flinched involuntarily.

At the next moment, the thunderous grinding and scraping noise came again from above. The door was opening!

Then, a ghostly glow cascaded down the stairs—the luminescence of a distant flashlight casting an eerie hue. That bit of light allowed Bob to see Jupiter, who was just standing right in front of him.

Upstairs, there was a lot of noise. They heard footsteps approaching! Someone was coming to the crypt!

18. The 115-Year-Old Secret

Moments later, two figures appeared at the top of the stairs. Two beams of light shone into the crypt, where it looked like a battleground with warriors standing around a shattered coffin, and pale bones that glowed in the light.

The Three Investigators let out sighs of relief the moment they realized who the two figures were—Inspector Cotta and another police officer! And directly behind them, holding another flashlight, was none other than Barbara Mathewson. The Three Investigators could see a broad grin on her face.

“Well, Mr Jennings,” she said, “maybe you’re not as smart as you think you are.”

Having enough evidence that the villains had committed a crime, the police proceeded with the formalities for an arrest. The sound of handcuffs clicking shut was music to Jupiter’s ears. Both Jennings and Shulin had given up all resistance after the policemen appeared—there was no escape for them.

Barbara sat enthroned on the top step like a queen. Her overalls were dirty, her trousers were torn at her left thigh, with the dark spots all around that looked like blood.

“Barbara, what happened to you?” Pete asked.

She looked down on herself. “Oh, in the museum, shards from the display case caught me. I didn’t even notice it at first... anyway, the cuts are not deep.” She crossed her arms. “I haven’t had a chance to attend to it as I had to save you three super heroes.”

“How did you—” Bob began.

“I explained the situation to the security guards. He tried to shut me up a couple of times, but I just kept talking.” The Three Investigators could only too well imagine this.

“Eventually, I think the guards were quite happy to let me call your Inspector Cotta—just to get rid of me. When the police arrived, Jennings had already left, so I told the inspector to come here. Anyway, my dad was also there and he left a deposit in the museum for the damage I did. While the police were still finalizing things there, my dad and I rushed over here.”

“Your father is here too?” Bob asked.

“He prefers to wait outside,” explained Barbara. “Dead bodies and coffins are not his thing.”

Pete moaned. “I’m with him on that!”

“We heard voices from the crypt and realized that you were all down here,” Barbara continued, “and we didn’t know what to do.”

“So you just locked us in here?” Bob wondered aloud.

“Closing the entrance door seemed like a good idea,” Barbara defended herself. “It’s a simple but dead sure method of holding these two grave robbers in here. That way they couldn’t escape, and I knew Inspector Cotta would turn up soon... In any case, everything worked out wonderfully.”

Barbara came down into the crypt, pushed herself past Jupiter, and went to the smashed coffin.

“This is the guy, right?” Curiously, she touched the pale skeleton hand. “Feels strange.”

Pete shuddered. “How can you—”

“Oh, he’s dead. Have you found the treasure?”

Shulin cursed. She stood next to Jennings in a corner of the room, held in check by Cotta’s colleague. “We were close, Alan... so close...”

Jupiter cleared his throat and turned to the inspector. “May I borrow your flashlight, sir?” Cotta handed it to him.

The First Investigator shone in Ignacio Jaramago’s coffin. He pushed some splinters and fragments aside, taking care not to touch the pale bones of the skeleton. Unlike Barbara, he did not feel the slightest desire to do so.

... And indeed, he soon discovered something in the coffin that had no place in there. It was a leather bag placed between the fleshless legs of the dead man amidst the remnants of his clothes.

With pointed fingers, Jupiter lifted the old, brittle leather bag and passed it on to Barbara with a satisfied smile. “For your antics at the museum, you’ve earned the honour of being the first to check this out.”

She beamed all over her face as she proceeded to undo the cord that tied the bag. However, it was not necessary as the cord disintegrated when she pulled on it.

The leather bag gaped open and when Jupiter shone the flashlight inside, something sparkled and shone. Barbara then took out a gemstone as big as the fingernail of her thumb. Her mouth fell open.

“Don’t let one of those disappear into your pouch,” said Pete, “or you’ll be in serious trouble.”

She turned the gemstone between her thumb and index finger. “Beautiful! Too bad, I have to hand this over to you, Inspector!” She put the gemstone back into the bag and handed it to Cotta.

“Thank you,” Cotta said. “Now, we should get back upstairs. The smell in here is unbearable!”

His colleague led the two villains up the stairs, and out of the mausoleum. Barbara and The Three Investigators followed behind and were soon greeted by Professor Mathewson.

“Now for the four of you,” Cotta said, “please come to the police department tomorrow as I need to record statements from you. Now go home and get some rest—and, uh... take a bath before that.”

As the police led Jennings and Shulin away, Jupiter called out calmly: “Wait, Mr Jennings!”

The rogue researcher turned around and gave him a grumpy look. “What do you want?”

“Most of what happened is clear to me by now,” said Jupiter, “but I have a few questions, in particular, how did the parchment book get lost over a century ago?”

“Why should I even tell you anything?” Jennings snapped.

“There are advantages if you cooperate with the police,” Cotta said.

“With the police—yes,” Jennings argued, “but with this rascal who—”

“He’s with us,” the inspector made it unmistakably clear. “At the moment, he knows more about this case than we do.”

Jennings sighed and then said: “My ancestor, Jacob Jennings, left the clues to the jewels in the parchment book. He was in prison for many years, and finally died in there. However, his immediate family never managed to reveal the clues. Because of this scandal, they lost their social standing here, and finally decided to move away from Rocky Beach. They sold everything that wasn’t nailed down... including the parchment book. After that, the trail got lost. That’s all I know from old letters.”

“So you knew what the parchment book looked like?”

Jennings nodded sullenly. "I saw it from an old family photo."

"Then I supposed that you broke into the parchment maker's place years ago, but didn't find what you were looking for," Jupiter presumed.

"Yes... Eventually, I happened to read Mathewson's interview and recognized the parchment book in the photo. That was really lucky for me."

"Sheesh... you call that lucky?" Shulin quipped mockingly.

"The rest is history," said Jupiter, now satisfied because he understood all the connections.

As the police escorted the villains away, the professor said: "Good work, but let's get out of here. On the way out, you can tell us what happened in there. The cemetery is not a place to be at night."

"Hear, hear," Pete agreed.

While walking back to their cars, The Three Investigators took turns to give a brief version of the chaos in the crypt.

"... So the turning point came when Shulin was about to reach into the coffin to look for the jewels," Bob reported. "Jupe, who was lying somewhere on the ground next to the coffin, disguised his voice and muttered something that sounded really like the corpse speaking out. Shulin was taken aback and Jupe pounced on her."

After knowing what had happened, Pete and Bob were not surprised at Jupiter's trick. After all, he was once a child actor in a television series. Till today, when the need arose, he had the ability to disguise his voice. Moreover, he had a very good working knowledge of Spanish.

"So Jupe, what was that you muttered to Shulin?" Pete asked.

"Ha! Ha!" Jupiter laughed. "I said: 'Go away! Leave me alone!'"

"Incredible! Actually, with that voice, it would have worked had you said: 'Let's have a beach party!' or anything for that matter!" Pete quipped.

Finally, they reached their cars. With satisfaction, Jupiter announced: "The Three Investigators have once again solved a case—a very old case, to be precise. For 115 years, no one has managed to solve the mystery and find the loot. We did it, fellas."

"—With my help," Barbara added. "Bob... as I understand, you will now document this case as part of your archives, right?"

"For sure," Bob replied. "That's the final step before we close the case."

"Don't forget to put in all my contributions. We worked so well together that if you ever need my help to get you out of a fix, just call. Then we can work together again as 'The Four Investigators'!"

The Three Investigators glanced at each other briefly, and they understood each other even without saying anything. They would certainly not change their agency's name... let alone take in a new member!